

# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind

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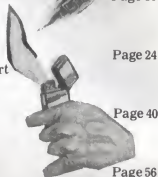
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# Merchant Dying

By Paul A. Gilster

Art By Bob Eggleton



It is just past four in the morning. The gears of the clock grind in the moonlight as Merchant bolts awake, rubbing a palm sticky with sweat over throbbing eyes. Sara is a tight, hunched shape next to him; she hugs her pillow with both hands. The moonlight catches her eyes and ricochets, an echo made of light.

"What is it?" she says, and there is a tone of exasperation in her voice, still throaty from sleep.

Merchant pulls up his knees and puts his chin on them, wrapping his arms around his legs. He stares straight ahead into a room that seems filled with light at 4:13 a.m.

"Go to sleep," he says roughly.

Sara sits up, stretches. She touches her right hand lightly to his cheek.

"Are you feeling bad?" She asks this

quietly, and her words are almost lost in the rustling of the sheets as Merchant draws himself up and out of bed to stand in the long moonlight. He is like a man carved out of white stone.

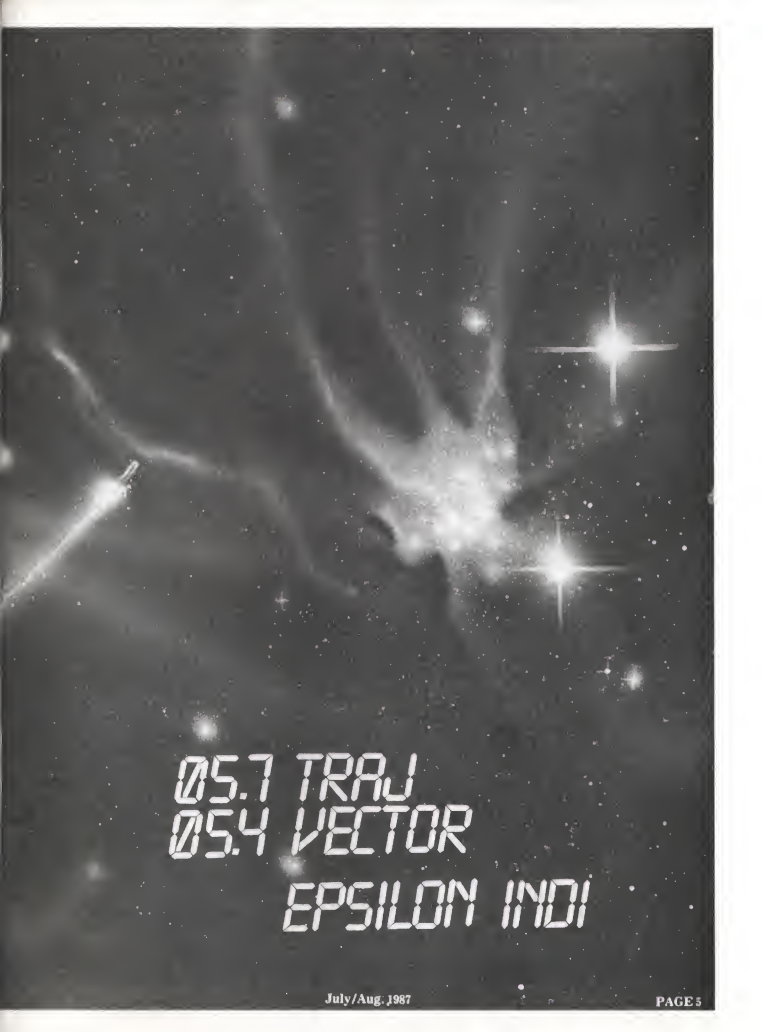
"I ache all over," he says, rubbing his arms. "Every time I get to sleep my muscles hurt and I wake up."

"It's too early for another pill," Sara says.

But Merchant does not answer. He walks into the bathroom and opens the medicine cabinet. His tiny pills rattle in their vial.

"Please, honey," he calls out. "Go back to sleep."

There is no further word from the bedroom, but as he swallows the pill, he hears her drawing the sheets around her. The birds are chattering outside the screen in a loud cadence. Their chirping



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is intense; they are driving their high tones like little, white-hot nails into the house.

Merchant draws on his bathrobe and walks down the stairs, across the small landing, and then, feeling his way in utter blackness, down a second flight of stairs to the hallway that leads to the kitchen. Here, in the depths of the house, the arrogant bird calls are muffled, and break harmlessly against the outer walls.

He draws cold water from the tap, fills the kettle, and puts it on to boil. He is shaking now, a tremolo that causes him to bang the coffee carafe on the faucet hard enough that he inspects it for cracks. Putting it back down, he places a filter cone on top of it and fills the cone with coffee.

While the water heats, he goes to the phone and dials in a number, along with his private access code. The screen stays blank while he types the password that will put him through to Tullock. Finally, a face appears. It is small, but thick lenses make the eyes large, like big gray marbles.

"Lee!" Tullock exclaims.

"I couldn't sleep," Merchant says. "Is anything going on?"

"You're not losing sleep over this bird, are you, Lee? She's in good hands until you get back."

Merchant is annoyed. He does not like questions to be answered with questions. His head throbs. "Damn you anyway. You're not my mother," he says.

Tullock nods and there is the ghost of a smile on his lips. "Sure. You want me to run some data at you?"

"Please." He misses this man, his daily associate for fourteen years, and as the screen darkens and rows of numbers begin to scroll up the smooth surface, he is filled with an intolerable loneliness.

He studies the screen and tries to ignore his suddenly churning stomach. The coffee water is boiling now; its gurgling is a homey counterpoint to these numbers and symbols that have crossed space and time to reach his kitchen. The numbers are like snakes. They weave and dance to their own internal rhythms.

Merchant has not called up this information to study it, but because it is his link with a living thing, bequeathed to him by three previous generations, that now bores through the dark curve of spacetime. Merchant is holding its hand across the void, feeling a pulse still throbbing. Although these signals have traveled over eleven years to reach him, they are not old. They flicker in a present dilated by pain.

The data dances. Merchant tries to picture this probe of gold and silver drinking information across the electromagnetic spectrum, but he cannot summon it up. Like the face of a lost love, it will not quite resolve.

He overrides the data stream and says into the open circuit, "How about giving me some stars to look at?"

"Sure, sure," Tullock mutters. "As though I didn't have anything better to do." And now the numbers are replaced by tiny points of light. No one

star stands out among the others. From the information printing out across the bottom of the screen, Merchant knows that the craft is looking back along its path of flight. One of these dots, one of the weakest, should be the Sun.

Merchant thanks Tullock for his time, but before he can break the connection Tullock interrupts him. "How are you feeling, Lee?" he asks softly. He is clearly apprehensive, and Merchant feels sorry for him. There is nothing he can do to make this easier.

"About the same, I guess," he says, for he has begun in the past week to lie. "Thanks."

Tullock smiles and the screen goes blank. Merchant now attends to the coffee, having to refill the kettle because he has let it boil dry. The coffee is a delicate Indonesian, but as he sips from his mug it seems dank and lifeless. He drinks half of it before his stomach lurches again, and he runs to the bathroom retching.

At breakfast, Sara scolds him about the coffee and feeds him toast and warm milk. He has a doctor appointment at ten and goes to it absently. It will be like the other appointments, the same tests, the same cheerful nurses. Merchant recognizes the little glint of fear that shows in their eyes. He thinks they are afraid that at some point in all this he will no longer be able to hold death in, that it will rise up and engulf them all like smoke.

Now he walks up the stairs and through the door. The nurses will see to it that he does not have to wait; although he is habitually early to all appointments, they will escort him directly down the bright corridors. Merchant enters the examining room. His head is turned to one side, his eyes down as the usual functions are measured: blood pressure, temperature, pulse. All goes into his record, now a thick black volume in the nurse's hand.

Dr. Fussell is a woman of perhaps forty-five years. Merchant and she share the same birthday, November 11. She has won his respect, for not once in the long diagnosis and treatment has she offered any false hope. For this he is profoundly grateful.

Now Dr. Fussell peers and pokes at his torso. Her eyes are bloodshot and shadowed by circles, reflecting the lights of the monitors. Blue and red flashes burst like fireworks within them.

"Will I get pneumonia?" Merchant asks as she taps upon him.

"Pneumonia!" She hammers out the word. "Why are you worried about pneumonia? You got enough troubles, pal."

"Everybody gets it right before they die. It's what really kills you, isn't it?"

Dr. Fussell swears absently and leads his hand to the monitor. Lights arc. She writes in the black book and turns on him.

"You're not going to go soft on me, are you?" Her voice is gravelly and she frowns at him.

"Not me," he says, but the words come out louder than he intends.

"Well, good, because there's no change here."

"May I smoke a cigarette?" he asks.

"I can think of no reason why not."

"The pleasures of the damned," says Merchant. He lights a Pall Mall. Smoking is, for some reason, one of the few things that does not make him feel sick to his stomach.

"How's your gadget doing?" Dr. Fussell asks, perched on the corner of the examination table.

"Very well. In fact, the strength of the signal has everyone surprised, considering the distance."

She nods her encouragement, but Merchant stops and looks away. The lines of his face are taut. For a moment, there is silence. "Am I going to last until August?" he asks finally. "I'd like to be there when it arrives."

Her eyes have softened. She shakes her head. "I don't think so, Lee."

So they talk of other things, specifically Sara, the new exhibit at the art museum and, because the question of his sleeping comes up, she hands him a prescription for yet another bottle of pills. He will fill it and take them, as he has filled and taken all the others. Were it not for Sara, he reflects, he would not take these infusions of drugs. He would let his body blossom with its illness, consuming him with the only energies he has left. He would walk into the woods and become a stone.

Merchant drives his van through heavy noonday traffic, thinking of Sara. She is slipping away from him, and he cannot bring her back because he does not remember how. His instincts have been dissolved by chemicals. He is a trans-human creature produced by a laboratory. Toxic Man.

A fine rain has begun. Merchant moves down a long, straight avenue flanked by palms. The sea rustles beyond the sound of engine and rain. The air is crisp with salt.

Yes, Merchant thinks, gripping the steering wheel very tightly, there is a new Sara too, a reserved Sara who will no longer show anger despite the provocation. A woman who is taking in his impending death with a certain degree of calculation. She is in that process of assessing odds that women bring to life's crises. He reflects that there is no limit to what women can stand. They are the ultimate survivors. Strip them of family, of friends, drive them from their home; still they endure. As Sara endures.

Something blue scuttles into the road. Later, Merchant will recall a young face, perhaps twelve years old, eyes open a little too wide, as though only now realizing the chance he is taking. Dark blue pants and a Navy blue windbreaker. A truck is between Merchant and this boy. Its red taillights have winked on and it is fishtailing on the slick pavement. Merchant slams his foot down and feels the traction of his tires go.

These are the last things he sees for twenty-four hours: the sight of the truck's taillights grown gigantic, the eruption of his windshield, a flash of the blue windbreaker against the pavement. There is no pain whatsoever.

During these hours when Merchant floats in the dreamless void, he is taken by ambulance to the hos-

pital, where he is given still more medication. He rests in a small private room with beige walls. The bandage on his head covers one eye and extends all the way around to the back of his neck. When he moves, groaning, on the bed, Sara's hand clutches his, squeezing it. Her face is composed; her expression does not change.

Merchant floats in his void, self-contained, an embryonic capsule afloat in a strange, flat sea. His body chugs and purrs in the great act of repair.

But this lasts twenty-four hours only. By the next afternoon, the rain has stopped. The sun is a pale hoop through low stratus, the buildings outside the window shimmering in soft haze. This is when Merchant sits up, prodded by the great crack-like pain in his head. Light floods his newly opened eyes. He vomits.

In another hour he has eaten a thin broth and has begun to remember the accident. "The boy," he asks. "The blue windbreaker."

"Nothing but bruises. Nobody got hurt but you." It is one of the nurses who has spoken, but Merchant barely hears her. There are too many sounds, each much too loud: the chatter of horns and swish of trucks, the rattle of the air conditioning vents, the hollow sound of the dishes on his tray as he moves them about.

He sees Sara come around the end of the bed. She places her face so close to his that her breath warms his cheek. "You've got a concussion, Lee. That's all it is."

"That's right, Dr. Merchant," says a short, stocky nurse who has suddenly come into view. She leans over him from the other corner of the bed. Her face is at right angles to his. "Quite a knock that was. Right through the windshield. You could have been cut to ribbons."

Merchant has already sunk back on the bed. The walls of the room seem to be rising up and folding about him. He only manages to say, "Sara, hold my hand," before the sky goes black. He is hardening inside a smoky egg. For a moment he feels Sara's hand in his, but quickly even his hands are gone.

That night, Merchant dreams. It is as if his mind must now release the images it has stored during his undreaming stupor. It is the monsoon of dreams. He is with Sara at a cafe before they married. The boy in the blue windbreaker is his son. He is killed in a freak accident on a strange, garish plain where the pelting rain is acid that eats at his van.

In the early afternoon of the next day, Sara brings Tullock to see him. Tullock's round face and gleaming lenses hover next to the bed, eyes cautious and narrow. His jollity is forced; he buzzes on about Merchant's recovery and the prospects of their having dinner after Merchant is released.

"Which is today!" he cries, and Sara nods in confirmation.

"Although — and they mean this, Lee — you're going to have to take it very slow," she says.

"Get your strength up," says Tullock.

*(Continued to page 45)*

# Borboleta

By James A. Stevens

Art By Bob Eggleton

They had no choice.

Despite the personal risk involved, Belchior had to attend the return of the hostages. Absence of the Terran expedition's chief scientific delegate would only worsen an already wretched situation, while only his presence could properly underline their strong desire to put an honorable end to a badly botched affair.

Belchior, of course, had more personal reasons for wishing to attend.

\*\*\*\*\*

*From the journal of Prudente Jose Belchior:*

*This should be an exciting time for me (and it is, it is), this first contact with an intelligent alien people. But other events distract me.*

*Maria Bethania is not with me, and I am lonely. She is aboard the Sangaree ship, a voluntary hostage, and so I fret for her safety.*

*And always, the sapping sense of self-doubt. Have I the right to keep the knowledge of her illness from her?*

\*\*\*\*\*

The Brazilians waited to set out from the *Pao de Acucar* until Maria Bethania and the aliens escorting her floated out from the Sangaree vessel and entered their section of the habitats.

As planned.

Belchior's nerves felt as taut as the five double strings of a *quinto*. He was glad Commodore Spindolla had insisted on sending along three Troopers to escort the dead hostage. The presence of Battle Sergeants Eanes, DaVila and Creuza in their forest-and-tan exosuits lent Belchior hope that, even should the use of force become inescapable, Maria Bethania might still be recovered alive.

Guilt for having kept the murder of the alien woman from her people worsened his already crushing sense of apprehension. The comsystem was open, but no one felt inclined to break silence, and the phones souged like the seawind that ceaselessly blew outside the beach cottage he and Maria Bethania kept on the radiant island of Sao Sebastiao.

The sound soothed, and Belchior very much

needed soothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

*From the journal of Prudente Jose Belchior:*

*It struck us as so primitive a notion, the aliens' proposal that we exchange hostages as a sign of good faith. Completely unexpected from a people that seem our technological equals. We got so involved discussing its possible significance that we forgot the purpose of this morning's command staff meeting until Maria Bethania jolted us by saying, "I am the obvious choice."*

That silenced the rest of us — Spindolla, First Officer de Souza, Assault Leader Cronho, the Synergist Pessoa and myself — quickly enough. In fact, an almost palpable tension settled over the others.

That Maria Bethania has for years been my protegee, my chief aide and my lover is common knowledge. What is perhaps less well known is her deepseated desire to establish her scientific reputation independent of me. Which explains why her expression, while not defiant, was unmistakably determined.

"What makes you say that, Doctor?" I said, with a trace of tenderness and pride I knew only she would sense.

"We know from our first meeting in the bubble that the alien hostage will be female. This would seem to indicate that they attach a high value to the female of their species."

"Or that they consider them expendable." This came from Cronho, the *Pao de Acucar's* Chief of Security.

"Either way," Maria Bethania continued, unfazed, "I think it is obvious that we too must offer a female hostage."

"What you say makes sense," Claudia Spindolla said. "But why should we risk you? We have any number of female combat personnel aboard. You could be putting yourself in harm's way. And you'd be unable to attend meetings in the bubble. Your scientific talents would be wasted."

"Where better for an anthropologist and linguist





to study the aliens' culture and language than living among them 24 hours a day, Commodore?"

Spindolla turned to me. She commands the expedition, but I am in charge of the scientific detachment and so suspected what was coming.

"You must decide if the scientific value of her presence aboard the Others' vessel outweighs other considerations, Doctor. I leave the decision to you."

The earlier tension returned to our group, the consciousness of the personal and emotional undercurrents at play, unspoken but very real.

"Frankly, my friends, I wish the decision were not mine to make," I said.

I saw pleading in Maria Bethania's eyes, but saw too resentment that I should hold such power over her, and that moved me. My mother named me Prudente, and prudent, I must confess, is something I may too often have been. Perhaps that is why I love this woman who wants so much to be mine but so strongly wants also to be her own. She is fiercely unlike me. She has never feared to take the biggest gamble, to chance it all when the prize merits the risk.

I rested the tip of my index finger pensively on my lips, our secret signal which means that in my heart I am kissing her, so she would know my decision before I spoke.

The look of joy and love in her eyes was almost more than I could bear.

\*\*\*\*\*

To screen it from the aliens, the three Sergeants, along with Belchior and the fifth man, the Synergist Pessoa, maintained a tight formation between the cryovac capsule and the habitats. Two meters long, cylindrical and rounded at each end, the capsule would keep the body frozen in vacuum until its seal were broken.

Like a great glowing cloud, the nebula O Cao, named for the constellation of the Dog in whose pattern it prominently appears, spread a backdrop of breathtaking beauty unimaginable lightyears beyond the lifebubbles. Its frayed edges of laurel green looked wind-whipped, creating the illusion of surging motion across the heavens, though at this enormous distance the cloud stood as still as a hologram.

Towards the cloud's center, laurel faded to a much lighter, more delicate green mixed with swirls of white, pale blue and pink. A gauzelike halo enveloped portions of the cloud, and over and around it unblinking stars great and small hung suspended.

The largest stars, Belchior knew, were actually planets orbiting a white dwarf whose relative nearness allowed it to dominate the celestial landscape. To Belchior's eyes, suns, worlds and cosmic cloud projected a chill beauty untouched by living warmth.

The two gargantuan motherships floated like toys in the void, and the great black spaces between the stars sucked at his soul, reminders of eternity and the vastness of nothingness.

Against this silent backdrop, alien and human came together.

\*\*\*\*\*

*From the journal of Prudente Jose Belchior:*

I suppose I have always been a secret pessimist. Bitter experience has taught me that anything I might especially want, Fate will surely deny me. I discovered early on that only when I care nothing about them will the things I most desire come to me.

It has happened too many times. And the price I pay is steep: When the thing comes, the lack of caring means it brings little joy.

Now, I must find a way to save Maria Bethania. But because I so desperately want her back, I know that our mission is foredoomed. Each time I think of it, my heart sickens and my body grows numb.

\*\*\*\*\*

A giant metal sphere capable of housing several thousand crewmen, the alien ship sprouted clumps and clusters of odd-looking gear separated by vast mysterious blank areas. The Pao de Acucar, by contrast, was a sprawling assortment of interlocked modules carved from stressed wood. A mile-long construct of the lunar shipyards, it had been assembled in space and resembled nothing more than a shishkebab covered with towers, turrets, weapons emplacements, antennae and thick forests of instrument clusters.

Seven weeks earlier, the two vessels had nestled into orbits a scant kilometer apart at previously agreed upon coordinates. Armored figures emerged from the alien sphere and began assembling a tear-shaped module. Soon, scarlet-and-silver exosuit crewmen from the Pao de Acucar had inflated a lifebubble. Once the two crews had erected the habitats, they jetted them towards a point equidistant from the motherships and confronted the problem of joining them.

A seamless flexible tube made of thick, transparent stressed cellulose provided the solution. They fitted each end around the airlock of a habitat and coated it with a polymer resin that reacted to vacuum by hermetically bonding itself to the habitat's surface.

Still protected by exosuits, more technicians entered the habitats and ran a battery of tests that confirmed a remarkable fact: the two atmospheres were similar enough to be breathable by both races.

Human and Other could meet, touch, communicate face to face. Each could, apparently, survive on the other's world. To those who gave the matter any thought, the discovery seemed a mixed blessing. A world you can live on might be worth visiting.

Or conquering.

\*\*\*\*\*

*From the journal of Prudente Jose Belchior:*

Odd and often touching how some unexpected smell or sound will catapult one without warning into the past.

I am listening to music now, a simple tune called "Borboleta," sung by Dulce Geisel's pure contralto, backed by the sweet, crystal chords of a quinto. She celebrates the butterflies that dapple the air of the village of Alegrete, how they dip and skip in the morning light, decorating the day. But she mourns, too, their short life, for when the sunlight dies, they die with it.

The tune takes me back to the time when Maria

*Bethania and I first dared admit our love for each other. Not so long ago: barely ten years. She was 23; I, 47. We had known one another all her life (practically all her life; I first held her in my arms when she was scarcely a year old). At eighteen, she was my student at the Universidad de Sao Paulo, with an intellect fine and precise and a face as sweet as the countenance of any of the Blessed Virgins.*

*"Borboleta" was new then, and we both loved the way it fluttered and soared and finally faded away like the butterflies of whose brief life it sang. It chanced to become popular at the time we chanced to fall in love, and so became our special song. And today, it makes the magic that transports me to the past.*

*But now, I can only weep at how brief your time, Maria Bethania. How sad your song.*

*Borboleta: butterfly.*

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Once inside the lifebubble, Belchior unsealed his viewflap and flipped back the hood of his navy-and-white exo. His heart beat faster. He breathed deeply, inhaling the pungent citrus scent of the miniature lemon trees that helped re-oxygenate the air, and his heart quieted.

Belchior touched a button to signal the aliens to initiate rotation, and seconds later the Brasilians felt the first centrifugal surge of fake gravity.

This being the Sangarees' turn to act as hosts, Belchior and Pessoa irised into the tube joining the two habitats. Eanes and his men clipped the capsule to a bulkhead and followed.

The first face Belchior looked for at the other end was Maria Bethania's. Six weeks since he had last seen her. She looked thinner, but happy, eyes bright with anticipation, the creamy chocolate of her skin a lovely contrast to the saffron-and-maize of her exo.

The sight of her was like a blow. The love he saw in her smiling eyes turned his muscles to water.

"Bem," the aliens' chief negotiator, Okendo, said in his halting Portuguese, "you come. With. Warriors. We, too."

He glided forward, and the plates of his mottled body armor creaked. They seemed to be of a material somewhere between the chitin of a crab's carapace and some carbon-based synthetic.

"You feel. Good?"

The bridge of Okendo's nose spread his small red eyes wide apart. The nose itself looked as though it had been mashed by a blow from a flatiron, and his skin, which was the color and texture of walnut shells, stretched taut over oddly slanted cheekbones. Fine reddish fur covered his head and elfin ears. There was something of the cat in him, and something of the scarab.

Okendo gripped Belchior's unresponsive hand, as did Keenyon, who was either Okendo's superior or immediate subordinate, though the Terrans had yet to determine which. The handshake was just one of a surprising number of gestures and facial expressions the two races shared.

"This moment. Much important. For our people," Okendo said, baring pointed teeth in the Sangaree

equivalent of a warm smile. It cooled when DaVila popped out of the tube close behind Creuza and it became apparent that no one else would follow.

Okendo's eyes darted from one Terran face to another, returning inevitably to Belchior's. The alien hissed something in the slippery Sangaree tongue, and with a harsh rustle and scrape of armorplate the suddenly tense guards closed ranks around Maria Bethania.

"And. Chankla?" Okendo said in Portuguese. There was an edge to his voice that even its strange whirry overtones could not mask.

"A bad thing has happened."

"She. Is sickened?"

"She is dead." Belchior found himself able to make only the flattest statements.

Maria Bethania's eyes widened. Okendo hissed sharply and jerked away as if slapped, then held back Keenyon, who had started for the Terran scientist. Pessoa and the Troopers gaped in consternation at Belchior.

"Is dead?" Okendo said.

Belchior nodded. Graveyard silence.

"An. Accident?"

"Murdered."

"Accidentally!" Pessoa cut in.

Okendo's eyes glittered. "Not. Understand. 'Murdered accidentally.' Please explain."

"A man, a guard, went berserk and killed her, and we don't know why," Pessoa said.

"He. Lives?"

"Yes."

"Unpunished?"

"He will not go unpunished."

"Her. Body?"

"In the bubble. Preserved."

"When. This happens?"

Pessoa looked to Belchior for help, but found none. Sweat beaded between his shoulderblades. "Eight meetings ago."

"You say. Nothing."

"We were afraid."

"What. You fear?"

Pessoa's words tumbled out. "That you would not believe it the act of a madman. That you would think we had deliberately betrayed your trust. That you —"

Belchior cut in. "That you might kill Maria Bethania."

Okendo glared at Belchior. Belchior met that glistening red gaze, breathing shallowly of the alien air, tasting in it the bitter tang of something like brine. He was glad of an excuse to avoid Maria Bethania's eyes. He knew she would be suffering the shock of finding a chasm where she had expected firm footing.

"Is," said Keenyon harshly, speaking Portuguese in the Terrans' presence for the first time, "our. Right!"

"That will gain you nothing," Pessoa said. "Only revenge."

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## A Message From Our Alien Publisher

# The Drones Are Willing ...

Ryan is getting closer. We have had several near encounters recently: one of them in a luxury hotel in Houston, one at a pier in San Juan, and another in a place called Revere, Massachusetts, where he chased me with an automobile. Only by the power of a 1986 Camaro Z28 was I able to elude him the last time. The many hours I have spent studying American television programming had fortunately prepared me for this eventuality.

When he saw me, I ran down the street until I found the Camaro, a V-8 with alloy wheels, fat tires, and a five-speed transmission. It required a matter of seconds to persuade the Camaro to take me out of there in a cacophony of wheel squealing and engine roaring, blue smoke rising from the spot where the fat tires left their substance on the pavement. Such departures are routine in Revere, and we excited very little notice.

Ryan gave chase in his vintage VW Beetle. The Camaro and I took a hard right turn, exceeding the Z28's skidpad at nearly 90 g's. We lost precious instants when the Camaro's Goodyear Eagle GTs were unable to hold the pavement, but we did better than Ryan, who never made the turn at all. We were safely into Saugus and speeding north on Route 1 before he was able to retrace our path. I turned

the Camaro loose in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at an Amoco station and bought a bus ticket back to Boston, so I could finish processing the library of a graduate school of education at one of the local universities.

Ryan could have caught me if he'd had my empathy for his machine. That's the last time I buy liquor in Revere. It's a shame. They were having a sale on aquavit, one of the two things (green olives being the other) that make life on this planet something beyond merely bearable.

I don't know how much longer I can elude Ryan. His resources appear to be limitless. Apparently, his science fiction magazine prospers. He has set up offices for his magazine in a high-rent location called Woburn. He bought that VW, of course, and he has moved his family to a rather stylish suburb, where he holds court by his swimming pool, drinking imported champagne and entertaining local celebrities. (What celebrities? Maybe he has confused us with *Omni*? Or maybe he's had too many aquavits?—Ed.)

To Ryan's class, prosperity appears to have no limits. Everybody is destined to own lots of things: appliances, entertainment devices, fancy cars, and so on. But there aren't quite enough

of these things to go around. So American society resolves itself into classes based on how much of these things a class's members can assemble.

At the very bottom are people who can afford nothing but subsistence and drugs. This is called the "underclass," and the society employs large numbers of civil servants of various sorts to keep it out of sight. The next step up is the working class. Every society must have drones, those who labor for the good of all without demanding excessive compensation, and in American society, these are known as "working class stiff." These are the people who can afford the basics: televisions, small homes, and cars. The members of the next class up, the middle, own VCRs, computers, auto-dialing and -answering telephones, compact disc players, imported performance cars, large houses, purebred dogs, matched sets of leather luggage, time-sharing condominium, and Scandinavian furniture.

You might wonder what there would be left to own, but in the upper class, people enjoy personally tailored clothes, vacation trips to places unknown to most of the populace, expensive foods, and more of everything the other two propertied classes own, only better made.

(Continued to page 47)



## BOOKS

By Darrell Schweitzer



# The Whole Spectrum of Fantastic Literature

Let's face it: Categories limit the way we think about fiction. To the very ignorant, the illiterate, or the hostile academic, all imaginative literature falls vaguely into the category of Horror — "crazy stuff about monsters" — if not into the category of Fairy Tales — "silly, not-real stuff for kiddies." That includes science fiction.

It is obviously nonsense, yet we have to admit that the categories themselves do mean *something*. Horror can teach us about the nightside of ourselves. Some of the world's most profound literature is hidden in books labeled Fairy Tales. As for Science Fiction, well, as many so-called mainstream writers are discovering, our world and its intellectual environment are changing so rapidly under the impact of technology that we can only admit that Science Fiction is late 20th-century realism. If you take a serious look at the world

around you, then write, the result will probably be Science Fiction.

Publishing categories exist for commercial reasons, entirely extra-literary. A book gets a certain type of cover, a certain label, and that determines where it goes in the publisher's catalogue, how many copies are printed, which part of the sales force takes it, and where it goes in the bookstore. One does not put a teen-age romance in with the detective fiction for the same reason the grocer doesn't put baked beans in with the breakfast cereal.

It's as simple as that, a fact of life, something writers have to either live with or live *around*. Genre labeling offers both protections and limits, often both a ceiling and a floor of sales, and, ironically, immortality of a sort.

Recently, just as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was on the Nebula ballot, the author was heard on talk shows disavowing any connection with SF. No, she writes "Literature." But the funny thing is (or will be) that in thirty years or so, I'll bet, the *survival* of that book will depend entirely on its being adopted retroactively into the genre. Imaginative works by

"mainstream" writers tend to vanish, only to be rediscovered by specialists and adopted into the genre by means of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series or the Avon Rediscoveries or the Gregg Press series. (All, alas, discontinued just now. This is not a good period for rediscoveries. These things come in waves.) Some day some specialist is going to dust off a copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* and say, "Hey! This is Science Fiction!" and reprint it as such. And it may become, belatedly, a classic. Karel Capek's *The War With the Newts* followed that route, as have (or should) many others. (I have my own list of candidates: Why doesn't someone reprint John Collier's *Full Circle* as Science Fiction?)

So, I have very mixed feelings about genre labels. They have their uses, and, as long as the writer doesn't let them narrow his mental horizons, I suppose they do more good than harm.

Which brings us to a book which is more science-fictional than fantasy, but clearly fantastic, and also horrific, but probably wasn't written to fit into any category:

(Continued to next page)

### RATING SYSTEM

☆☆☆☆☆  
☆☆☆☆  
☆☆☆☆  
☆☆☆  
☆☆  
☆

Outstanding  
Very good  
Good  
Fair  
Poor

*This is the Way the World Ends*

By James Morrow

Henry Holt, 1986

319 pp., \$18.95

There have been countless books and stories about World War III, all of which come to pretty much the same conclusion. Ted Sturgeon said it all eloquently in "Thunder and Roses" in 1947. By the early '50s, most writers and editors had agreed that "doomsday is overdue."

But at the same time, the shadow of the mushroom cloud still hangs over us. The theme remains as valid now as it was forty years ago. Nuclear anxiety is as much a part of the real world now as it was then, and science fiction, if it is to have any meaning, has to reflect the real world.

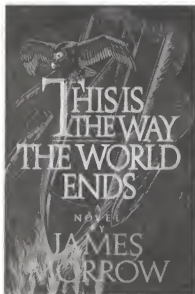
And, surprise — here is a fresh look at the subject, not a realistic book by any means, not a survivalist tale, or even a nobody-survives tale (though, indeed, nobody does), much less a nuke-'em-into-Elfland tale, a *la* the movie *Wizards*. It is a black, absurdist comedy in the manner of *Brazil* or *Dr. Strangelove*, or, to use literary examples, comparable to Philip Dick or John Sladek at their darkest and most manic.

The story begins with Americans zipping up into Self-Contained Post-Attack Survival (SCOPAS) suits and becoming complacent as a result. Our hero, a tombstone engraver by trade, urgently seeks a SCOPAS suit for his daughter's Christmas present, and signs a very strange agreement to get one. (He admits complicity in the arms race.) Then, presto — the world blows up. The suits are useless. The Unadmitted, sort of anti-ghosts of people who would have been born had the human race not become extinct at this juncture, snatch the hero and a handful of other survivors (military and government men mostly) off to Antarctica, where they are put on trial for (in the broadest sense of the term) crimes against humanity.

All this begins with almost

light comedy, dives into horror of the most explicit sort, then becomes black comedy again (there is even a Mutual Assured Destruction — M.A.D. — Hatter) before the trial goes on at length and threatens to become a tirade.

This is a political novel, and like most political novels, it preaches. Various cases for the prosecution and the defense are made, and ultimately Morrow has no convincing solution. He dismisses the Soviet system with the back of a hand, but then fails to answer the crucial question of how the West is supposed to remain free and give up nuclear weapons at the same time. Oh, schemes are proposed, but the



ultimate conclusion I came away with was that these matters may indeed require far more wisdom than is available. So, this book is about what happens when our dumb luck runs out.

What makes it memorable is its absurd, ghostly, surreal, and intensely moving climax when there is no hope left and all the hero's schemes and plans are exposed as lies, and the Unadmitted gradually fade into the nothingness whence they came. It's moving because the characters, the war criminals who are executed, the unadmitted, and the woman who may or may not be the last real woman in the

world, are all distinct individuals that we care about. They fade out and the hero is left to carve his last tombstone, an epitaph for the human race. In the end, the book is an elegy for all that is lost.

I think the power and uniqueness of Morrow's novel is simply this: all politics and preachments aside, if there actually is a nuclear war and someone survives to read the pre-holocaust literature, *This is the Way the World Ends* will be one of the very few books, by virtue of its black absurdities and sadness, which will provide any real comfort or understanding.

Rating: ★★★★★

(A footnote: I write this about a week after the 1987 Nebula Awards banquet. *This is the Way the World Ends* was a finalist, but lost. Mr. Morrow has a new story in the May *F&SF*. So he is getting the genre identification he needs to focus his readership. He may have the best of both worlds, since he is known as a science fiction writer, but his books aren't published in a science fiction line. So *This is the Way the World Ends* may be read by lots of people who "never read science fiction.")

*Vacuum Flowers*

By Michael Swanwick

Arbor House, 1987

248 pp., \$15.95

Now here's a novel you know is hard-core Science Fiction, a serial from Isaac Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine* by a prominent new writer in the field, and very probably a 1988 Nebula contender from the looks of the way the Nebula Awards Report is going.

I wanted to like this book. The first few pages convinced me it was going to be splendid. I only wish I had stayed convinced.

Swanwick has been a very skilled writer from the beginning of his career. One of his first stories, "The Feast of St. Janis," published in *New Dimensions*, is everything you could want from a modern science-fiction story, the sort of thing most writers can on-

ly hope to write someday.

But he has not yet mastered the novel, and in the past he's been quite weak on science. His first novel, *In the Drift*, was a not quite coherent fix-up of novelettes based on the premise that Three Mile Island melted down and in the ensuing chaos all of western civilization fell apart like a house of cards. That the Soviet Union didn't collapse after Chernobyl is perhaps relevant, as is the 1946 population of Hiroshima (I looked it up — 45,000), and the figure a technically minded friend came up with (Swanwick had exaggerated the level of radiation by a factor of ten to the fourth), but in



its own weird way *In the Drift* became a cross-genre hybrid, a horror novel of good characterizations and nifty sociological ideas mixed up with comic-book level "nuke" magic (which makes wastelands glow in the dark two centuries after the fact and produces mutated human vampires), exposing all Swanwick's strengths and weaknesses much more clearly than did any of his short fiction.

Now we have *Vacuum Flowers*, much stronger on scientific plausibility but much weaker on the storytelling basics. I'm not sure what has happened. Here Swanwick has become an idea man to the exclusion of all else. And his ideas are good ones.

*Vacuum Flowers* is as idea-rich as anything by John Varley or Alfred Bester.

The central premise is striking: *wetware*, a technology of human programming whereby people can assume any personality, be made into anything, or be taught anything with the help of a wafer. The implications are well extrapolated: commercially available personas, identity problems, a whole new conception of job training, conformist and totalitarian societies of various stripes, and even the blending of everyone on Earth into a single group-mind. And, following John W. Campbell's dictum that the future doesn't happen one at a time, there are other changes: all this takes place against the background of a colonized solar system. Again, more fascinating ideas about what such an environment would be like. You'll not forget the slums in the old O'Neill colonies.

But, alas, after a promising start, the storyline gets lost. The main character doesn't seem to have any goal, and just tags along from scene to scene while other folks do whatever they do for no apparent reasons. The reader is hard-pressed to find anything in the way of motivations or tension or connecting logic. Early on, the heroine gets a readout of her chances of being assassinated (a big corporation is after her because her personality is the only, bootlegged copy of a hot new product) and the statistics are grim, but throughout the rest of the book this is mostly ignored. There isn't so much as a chase plot to hold everything together, and the characterizations are some of the weakest I've seen in a major science fiction novel in a long time. Even the physical action gets murky. When, at the end of one scene, one character is dead and another announces that he broke the fellow's neck, and I went back and could not find when or how this was done, I knew the book was in deep trouble. Even though I was reading the book version, I kept referring to the synopses between the in-

stallments of the Asimov's serial to try to make sense out of it all.

Think of this as a corpse which looks outwardly perfect, but lacks bones, major organs, etc.: the insides are mush.

Rating: ☆ ½

*The Eyes of the Dragon*

By Stephen King

Viking, 1987

326 pp., \$18.95

I've often wondered, and I'm sure Stephen King has too, what would happen if the King of Horror wrote something wildly removed from his accustomed genre, say, a light romantic com-



edy. His readers, his publishers, those publishers' promotion departments, the major bookstore chains all have expectations about the next Stephen King book. So, if King wrote something way off base, famous as he is, would he be able to sell it?

*The Eyes of the Dragon* provides some of the answer: well, maybe. This book is off base enough, a mixture of sword and sorcery and the children's fairy tale. It can be packaged as fantasy. There's a dragon on the cover. After *The Talisman* and *The Stand*, that's not too far removed from the usual King

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Art by  
Courtney Skinner



# Doing Time

By John Stith

Art By Cortney Skinner

The time it took the Nebbin captain to sentence my partner was shorter than a one-year-old's attention span.

"Let's see," he said. "Samo Tobert. Another Earth troublemaker. That will be five Earth-years." He paused for effect before he looked up. "At Tindolina Prison."

Tobert had taken the five-year sentence silently, but with the final phrase he lost all chances of being a model prisoner. "You stinking chop! Five years in Tindolina? Is this just some big joke to you? That's inhuman. Five —"

His ranting was prematurely terminated by the guards as they apparently decided that Tobert had said enough. I couldn't see what they did, but Tobert abruptly slumped, and a Nebbin MP carried him away.

I stepped forward to fill the position formerly occupied by my stocky compatriot as the echoes of his departure faded away. The fact that Tobert had reacted more strongly to the word *Tindolina* than to the five-year term made me nervous since the name meant nothing to me. Tobert had been on Bolindaro a lot longer than I had.

I studied the Nebbin's face as he read my record. His squared-off facial surfaces could almost have been chopped out of a crystalline cube. Reflections from his skin were reminiscent of windows and mirrors, not flexible tissue. Nebbin troops had removed my own makeup earlier in the day. This had been a terrific first six months in the service.

He looked up at me. I guess he wanted to see what kind of expert could get caught in less than a week on Bolindaro.

"Rik Gannon. That will be five years at Tindolina."

Something in his voice told me Tobert had been right. It was a joke to the Nebbin. He must have been doing the Nebbin equivalent of grinning, but I couldn't see any change in his features. The guard prodded me to leave, but I had to find out.

"You seem to enjoy telling us we're headed for Tindolina, whatever that is, but I'm new here. I've

never heard of it so I'm not scared. You want to tell me about it?" At first I thought he wouldn't reply, but, as the guard nudged me again, he raised his hand.

"Very well. I'd hate for you not to know until later." He pushed aside the video screen so he could see me better. "Tindolina is a relatively comfortable place, rather like our regular prisons, but it's reserved for aliens. Tindolina is unlike the others in one important respect, however." He looked directly into my eyes as he continued. "Tindolina is a *time-compression prison*."

I felt a gnawing in my stomach, but I didn't want to give him the show he was hoping for. "Time compression?"

"Time compression, time expansion — it's merely a question of viewpoint."

I wished I could read the expression in the stiff planes of his face, but he had to be enjoying himself.

"Subjective time progresses at a different rate for the inmates," he said. "For every minute you spend inside, the outside world will spend several minutes."

He paused again. He had to be priming me for the final blow. "You might be interested to know that the time-compression ratio is currently adjusted to *twenty-to-one*."

My reactions were a shade faster than Tobert's. I was on top of the counter before the guards reacted, but I couldn't even reach the Nebbin before the guards reached me. A searing pain behind my eyes made me feel as though my head were coming off. The last thought roaring through my brain as consciousness slipped away was *one hundred years*.

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We were nearing the outskirts of Kimilito when the vibration under me prodded me back into the real world. Two guards, Tobert, and I were traveling in a small, four-person skimmer, so I guessed that the prison must be close to the city. That figured. The Nebbins always liked to put pact-protected installations near potential targets.

We landed near what must have been the main entrance. The complex looked more like a huge office building than a prison. From above, the building had

appeared to consist of two concentric circles, with the center ring approximately eighty percent of the diameter of the larger one. As the guards led us in, I couldn't see any straight lines at all. The whole facility was composed of arcs, circles, and balls, in the typical Nebbin style.

Tobert tried to say something, but the guards shut him up. From what I gathered though, we'd soon have plenty of time to talk. As we passed through the front foyer, the security seemed unbelievably lax. There were few guards and fewer doors. The only locks I saw on doors were apparently designed to keep outsiders out rather than insiders in. I wondered what kind of system could inspire such trust.

The place had a simple touch, except for the ornate belts the guards wore. I wondered if the prison tailor got kickbacks from a belt supplier until I noticed that the gaudy belt buckles bore switches, appearing to be functional mechanisms, rather than ornamental. We made a quick stop where we exchanged our clothes for some tight-fitting, elastic inmate uniforms. All of the uniforms were approximately the same size. Nebbins had much less variability in height than humans, so all the humans selected for guerrilla actions and infiltration were close to one and three-quarter meters tall.

The guards guided us along a narrow, arched corridor which opened into a chamber containing two more guards. The far wall of the chamber appeared to be a glowing archway. As we neared it, I saw a green fuzzy wall, but the vague features made it look as though it wasn't actually solid. When we came forward, one of the guards flicked a control which caused the wall to recede about three meters, exposing a set of opposing columns of shiny circles on each side of the corridor.

As we watched, a red warning indicator came on at two-second intervals. One of the guards explained that, when the indicator was on, a dozen lasers cut through the doorway. We moved forward carefully until we were between the laser gate and the green wall.

The younger guard called to us, speaking for the first time since we had entered the complex. "You're in for some new experiences in there. Face the green gate and start moving, but you'd better walk like this and sit down as soon as you're on the other side, if you don't want to break your nose." Almost apologetic, he demonstrated a slow shuffle.

I felt pretty foolish as I shuffled up to the green area, but Tobert didn't act surprised by what we had heard, so I kept going. As we reached the vertical green surface, I could see small disturbances in it that looked like tiny water waves, flowing up. The guard urged us on, and I shuffled through.

I was suddenly disoriented, as though I had awakened in a strange environment and couldn't remember how I got there. On my left, Tobert's stocky frame was just coming through the field wall. Ahead, the center of the prison stretched out into the distance, where I could see a large, central circular enclosure with small doorways at intervals around it. Distracted

by all the new sights, I made a stupid mistake.

I stopped shuffling and tried to walk.

One instant I lifted my foot; the next, I was rubbing my nose and forehead and trying to pick myself up from the floor. I was glad that I already had a snub nose.

Fortunately, Tobert stopped me before I had another accident. "Stay put, Rik," he said urgently.

"Stay put? I can still walk," I said with unwarranted confidence.

"Just sit down and let's talk first. I've heard a little about this place. Let me tell you what's going on before you try anything stupid. Once I'm done, you go ahead and jump around all you want — if you can." He spoke from a squatting position, and then he sat. Once settled, he swept his brown hair back over his forehead. "Before you do anything else, take a look at your watch."

"I really don't care what time it is —" I stopped in mid-sentence as I glanced at my watch and saw the seconds advancing wildly. The ten's digit was counting about every half-second, and the one's digit was a blur. The minutes bumped up by one about every three seconds.

"My God. Maybe I haven't been taking all this seriously enough." I was glad I was now sitting.

"Like the man said. Tindolina is a time-compression prison. I've heard enough about it to know I never wanted to see the inside, but not a whole lot more. I do know this actual confinement area is subjected to a field which slows down perceptions. I'm not sure they literally manipulate time, but they might as well. You saw the belts on the guards?"

"Yeah."

"Those buckles contain mechanisms to counteract the field and allow them to enter this area and still function at a regular pace."

Suddenly curious, I looked back over my shoulder at the entrance. The green field wall had moved back to its original location, exposing the warning indicator, and now it seemed to be continually on. I started to get up but Tobert held me back.

"Wait a minute, Rik. I don't think you really have a full appreciation for what's happening yet. Look."

He took off his watch and held it a half-meter from the floor. "Watch closely," he said, giving me an apologetic grin. And he dropped his watch.

I barely saw the blur as the watch crashed to the floor.

"Are you crazy?" I paused as I realized that his watch was intact and in perfect working condition. I took the watch and examined it. Except for the fact that it was literally fast, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it.

"Now do you understand?" he asked. "Gravity isn't any stronger in this field. Time isn't proceeding at a slower rate than outside. What's changed are our perceptions. Just think of it as if our reaction times have been slowed down by a factor of twenty. There's a lot more to it than that, but the analogy will help you anticipate some of the phenomena. Everything still happens at normal speed — we just perceive it dif-

ferently. My watch probably took a third of a second to fall, but to us it appeared to fall in ten or twenty milliseconds."

"So that's why it wasn't damaged. It had the same momentum it would normally have after being dropped from that height in this gravity."

"Right. You're catching on."

"I hope you'll forgive me if I'm wrong about this little experiment," I said as I swung my fist into his jaw with all the force I could manage.

I wasn't wrong.

My fist just bounced lightly as it reached his chin.

Tobert didn't look the least bit offended. He merely smiled and said, "Okay. I think we might be ready to move now. But I'm afraid you see the hopelessness of trying to get out. If you can't even hurt me, imagine how hard it's going to be to get the jump on an armed guard who can move twenty times faster than you." He motioned for me to follow him as he started crawling toward the center of the complex.

I started to follow on all fours, but quickly bashed my nose and forehead again. Shuffle and crawl, shuffle and crawl, I told myself. Only by keeping all four limbs in constant contact with the ground could I stay up. The moment I depended on balance, gravity whipped me to the floor. The only tolerable aspect was that I hit with just the force of someone kneeling and falling forward. If I had hit the ground at the speed my senses indicated, once would have been my limit. I also realized that being cooped up in there would make it tough to play handball, even if they had the facilities.

As we crept forward, I made another examination of the interior of the prison. Ahead, there were several inmates, mostly human, with three Roklovons. I felt like a one-year-old as we crawled and shuffled our way in to meet the others.

From my vantage point near the floor, the ceilings seemed high, but a rational inspection told me they must be no more than three meters high. The interior designs also made liberal use of arcs and curves. The only lines I could see that appeared straight were probably arcs seen on edge. All surfaces were a drab off-white.

When we reached the group of inmates, they helped us into seats, but we weren't greeted as long-lost friends. The others were civil but apathetic. Since I had just received one of my biggest doses of humiliation and despair, I could understand their mood.

A gray-haired man with deep wrinkles volunteered a little information. "I'm Barnes Kottle. Welcome to Tindolina. I won't repeat any old jokes about time flying by when you're having fun."

"Thanks. I'm Rik Gannon," I said, and introduced Tobert, who was evidently feeling shy.

"The feeding times are 0600, 1200, and 1800, by that clock," Kottle told us.

As he pointed, I looked back toward the green archway where we had entered. "What's the display for?" I asked, noticing a large screen near the clock.

One of the Roklovons joined our conversation, and he answered: "So communications with guards can

occur. Voices twenty times speeded are as insect chirps to us."

"There's also a keyboard over there," Kottle said, pointing, "so we can get a message to them."

The Roklovon, whose name was Drobny, was about my height, but incredibly thin. His facial hair had dark patches on both cheeks, otherwise I would not have been easily able to tell him from the other two who listened from the fringe of the group. I was fairly sure the thinness was racial, rather than the result of undernourishment.

We talked for a while longer, until Kottle nodded in the direction of the clock. It read 1159 and, as I realized the significance, I suddenly felt starved.

"How's the food here?" I asked. "I could sure use a nice cold —" I stopped as I saw a blur of green moving around the table. By the time the blur was gone, the table had been set.

"Don't get your hopes too high," Kottle said as I crawled to the table. "You might be able to get one gulp that's cool, but that's about the limit."

I didn't understand at first, but then it came to me. "Of course. It might start out cold, but at our speed it'll warm up twenty times too fast." Sure enough; I reached a place at the table and the glass felt faintly chilled, but, as I held it, it rapidly approached room temperature. In an effort to drink some while it was still slightly cool, I again completely forgot about my reaction time.

As I lifted the cup and tilted it to my mouth, I was doused with the liquid.

Cursing myself for a fool, I at least had a wry laugh as Tobert's cup overflowed, too.

Kottle barely tilted his glass and took a slow sip. When he put the container down he winked at us. "You'll get used to it. I could have warned you, but, like everything else here, you'll remember it a lot better if you experience it yourself once."

That did it. I'd had all I cared to take from that place. In my frustration, I took one of the fruits from my plate and hurled it at the wall. At least I intended to hurl it. As it left my fingertips it took a nose dive toward the floor.

I think I threw it all of a meter.

"Damn it all!" I was near my limit. The full consequences of that God-forsaken prison were finally reaching me.

"Better eat your food," Kottle said, evidently sensing I was no longer in a mood conducive to cute little demonstrations. "It gets stale really fast, and I guess it goes without saying that nothing is ever hot either."

We ate the rest of the meal in silence.

\*\*\* \*\*

That "afternoon" I learned to walk.

It wasn't too bad if I shuffled slowly and kept my entire concentration on balancing. Walking depended on being able to hang onto railings mounted on most of the walls. In the course of practicing, it occurred to me that if one of the guards would lie down and let me fall on him, I might just be able to pick myself back up by the time he regained consciousness. I decided that

plan didn't merit a letter designation, much less one near the beginning of the alphabet.

After the evening meal, I cornered Kottle, as well as I could in a roomful of circles, and asked more questions. "When do the guards come in here? Just to deliver meals and pick up the remains?"

"Mainly, but they also come in to clean up twice a 'day,' at 1000 and 1600. And they take out a load of dirty uniforms and leave a fresh supply. Why?"

"I've got to know all I can about this place to figure out how to get out."

"You're crazy. You expect to get out of here, get through the outside area, and get clean away? That's a fantasy."

"This is the only difficult area. The Nebbins are so confident with the central prison, they have hardly any forces for the outer section."

Talking to Kottle was like talking to a politician who didn't need my vote. "You don't know what you're talking about. Just forget it." Kottle shuffled away.

I did my drag-step over to Tobert. A brief conversation with him yielded about the same results as the one with Kottle, but Tobert seemed a bit more open-minded.

"So what's your plan, genius?" Tobert asked.

"I'll show you in the morning," I said, to cover the fact that I didn't have the vaguest idea yet.

\*\*\* \*\*

At breakfast, Tobert asked me again.

"Come and help," I replied.

Together we casually shuffled back to the sleeping area, two concentric rings of small wedge-shaped rooms, each with a cot and a heavy bench. In the Nebbin style, the interiors were covered with balls, as though they had taken ten-centimeter spheres, shaved off about a tenth of each, and glued them to the walls.

"According to Kottle," I said, "they'll clean this area in about an 'hour.' With my reaction time, there's no way to win a fight, but with gravity working normally, there's a possibility."

Shortly before 1000, I was in my room, perched on two cots leaned against the wall and hanging onto two spheres. Drobny had come around, interested in what we were doing, but I convinced him to go away.

"The guard's coming," Tobert said abruptly.

I assumed that the Nebbin equivalent of a janitor was about three or four doors away, so my heart started pounding as I prepared to leap — no, make that fall. I couldn't hold on much longer.

Suddenly I saw a green blur in the space below me, and I let go.

I think maybe I hit his foot.

Unfortunately, I didn't land with an unconscious Nebbin beneath me. And it wasn't bad enough that I knocked my wind out and got several bruises. Just as I sensed that I was being moved, I found myself standing shakily in the corridor.

Whoever I had nearly landed on possessed a particularly poor combination of a rotten sense of humor and a sadistic streak. As I stood, I felt a sharp stinging *whop* in the middle of my back.

The Nebbin must have pulled a section of my elastic uniform — it seemed like maybe thirty or forty meters — and let it pop back. It stung like a vicious punch. I felt more and more *pops* from all over. He buzzed around me like a small tornado, repeatedly snapping me. After a short time I lost my balance again, but even when I was on the floor the snapping continued. When the Nebbin finally got tired or bored, my body was a mass of welts.

Tobert's voice broke through my agony as he said, "So much for plan A." As I lay there, Drobny walked past, making a sound which almost certainly had to be a laugh.

\*\*\* \*\*

A good rest helped me calm down and think a little more rationally. Unfortunately, rational thinking told me there was no way out.

The situation was more depressing than a ten-gee liftoff. My thoughts bounced between the friends I would never see again, and the underhanded way the Nebbins had set up Tindolina Prison. Article Four was unambiguous; prisoners must be released in no fewer than five Terran years. They had followed the rules — *their* way.

It was shaping up to be a long cold war. Now, Tobert and I wouldn't even be able to do our meager part: stirring up unrest in the Nebbin civilian population on Bolindaro. Even the Roklovons here wouldn't be able to continue their trading. I knew the Nebbin upper echelon wanted trade only with the colonies they had invaded and occupied. But their recent turn to hard-line policies and locking up independent Roklovons for trading, was even more extreme. So what if the Roklovons lived past the five-century mark? One hundred years is a huge gap in anyone's cultural continuum.

A few "days" passed, and, as the pressure of lost time mounted, I began to worry about Drobny. Wherever Tobert and I went, Drobny seemed to be nearby. He never associated with the other Roklovons. Was he a Nebbin collaborator? In fact, had Plan A failed because the guard had known what to expect? A couple of times, I almost asked Drobny what was going on, but I held back, hoping to learn more just by watching and listening.

I did a lot of watching and listening, especially noticing what little there was to see and hear of the Nebbin guards. They appeared to be creatures of habit. Every "day" at predictable times came the same series of blurs as they brought meals, retrieved the trays, left clean elastic suits, carried dirty ones back, and cleaned the bunk rooms. I kept watching for some use of the keyboard communications, trying to imagine how to use it to get out.

The days had the same monotony as the Nebbins' taste in decor. Three meals and sleep. The Nebbins were sure saving on food expenses; they needed to feed us only three meals for every twenty days.

I was eating another lunch of tepid gruel when Drobny approached me again.

"You strive still for escapement?" he asked.

"No. It seems useless." If Drobny was a col-





laborator, there was no point in telling him anything. If not, there was still no need in raising false hopes.

"But you surprise always," he said.

"Just curious."

"Your attempt had silliness."

"But you didn't have to laugh about it."

"Our humor not same as yours?" Drobny turned his unreadable gaze back to the table.

"I guess not. That hurt quite a bit."

"The snapping? Perhaps our pain levels are not same." Drobny rose and slowly moved to another seat. I couldn't tell if he was embarrassed to find that he had laughed while I was in pain and wouldn't apologize, or didn't believe it had actually hurt.

Losing time at a twenty-to-one rate depressed me, but I watched everything I could. The guards seemed easier to notice, now that I always knew where and when they'd be moving, but I knew it was a perceptual error. I overdosed on wishful thinking. When I dreamed, I saw the face of my watch, time speeding crazily by, unchecked.

During my waking hours, I tried to keep fit. I had been in fairly good shape before, but in that nightmarish interior, I could work up a good sweat just doing five pushups. Jumping was literally impossible.

My welts healed, but my resentment still burned, whether at the treatment or the embarrassment, I couldn't tell. One morning, while remembering the pain, I had the glimmerings of an idea, one that might have better chances of success. I almost gave it up, thinking of the earlier failure, but I grew more watchful, trying to fill out the rest of the idea, and looking for pitfalls.

Not much later, I was calling it Plan B, to myself. But I needed help.

Tobert was lethargic and pessimistic. It took several conversations to convince him that there was nothing to lose — well, maybe not exactly nothing, but the risk seemed reasonable. The problem was keeping away from Drobny. He was almost always nearer to us than the other Roklovons. Finally we had to take Kottle into our confidence, partially, and arranged for him to detain Drobny by starting a conversation at the right time.

During the next day, I managed secretly to store several items necessary to the plan.

I slept fitfully that "night."

By 0800 the next "morning," the trap was almost ready. Almost a dozen elastic suits were missing from the uniform supply area. My sleeping room and the adjacent four on each side were almost dark. Elastic suits blocked the indirect ceiling lights.

Tobert and I waited in a compartment across the corridor from mine. I was close enough to the doorway to see quite a distance down the corridor. We hoped not to see Drobny. He should be with Kottle.

Shortly after 1000, the first compartment brightened, followed at approximately two-second intervals by the next three compartments. I wished I knew what the guard felt as he entered my compartment. His first experience should be confusion at

tripping on the thin elastic cord stretched across the opening of the arch. I hoped that even before the surprise registered, the mass of meal trays would catapult into his head and chest, driven by the giant slingshot formed by most of the remaining rubber suits.

Finally I heard the sound I was waiting for.

There came a high-pitched *click* and the guard's prone body appeared on the floor of the corridor. Tobert and I raced out, as fast as we could race while shuffling on all fours in low gear, and arrived as the Nebbin was beginning to show signs of recovering.

The bench we dropped on him stopped that.

Pulling the extra elastic suits from our necks, we tied him so thoroughly, he couldn't even wiggle to help.

In the relative security of the compartment, I stripped the guard's belt off and put it around my waist. I had to get out quickly. We had taken over thirty "seconds" already and the guard was almost overdue by then. As I clicked the fastener, easy balance returned, and Tobert stopped in place. I felt as if I was on a floor again, rather than trying to balance on a ball bearing. I looked more closely and I could see that Tobert was actually moving, but very slowly. I grabbed the guard's gun and then held my fingers in an "Okay" sign for about ten seconds. As I saw the beginnings of a grin on Tobert's face I started running toward the entrance arch.

I ran as fast as I could, passing Kottle, Drobny, and the other inmates frozen in position. When I neared the arch, I checked the gun to make sure I knew how to use it. There was no way to tell if the gun killed or stunned, but it vibrated when the trigger was depressed. Nearing the lasers, I could see the indicator lighting every two seconds again.

Surprise was the key, so I timed my rush and sped through the arch. The two guards in the chamber were relaxing, totally unaware of their danger. I fired twice and they both fell. I stripped their belts and guns and heaved them back through the arch, between laser bursts.

Ten minutes later, the prison looked as if there had just been a clearance sale on inmates.

My worries of Drobny being a collaborator vanished. No one was quicker to respond and help redistribute belts to those still inside.

It wasn't until much later that I learned why Drobny had been so antisocial to the other Roklovons. The brown patches of fur on Drobny's cheeks, had I known a little more about the Roklovons, would have told me that Drobny was female. The information tougher to acquire was that the Roklovons have a sex drive which climbs almost exponentially during even short periods of abstinence. Drobny probably hadn't dared get near the males any more than they had dared to approach her. I hated to think about the frustrations that would have resulted from any experimenting in that time-warp environment.

No more than an hour after we escaped from Tin-

(Continued to page 46)

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# The Darkfishers

By John Gregory Betancourt

Art by Pat Morrissey

*From the log of the Albert Einstein  
July 14, 2131*

*The starship sank today. Flush's oceans are just too big; we couldn't make it to an island. Fortunately we managed to evacuate the surviving crew onto dry land of sorts, a gigantic floating crustacean. It has vegetation growing on its back, so I have little fear it will submerge and drown us. Who knows? Perhaps it will be a suitable base until we make it to shore. If this thing ever goes near shore.*

*I pray I do not die here. The isolation is awful. When will they come for us? When will they answer our distress call?*

—Julie MacIntyre  
Acting Commander

*Drifting...*

The world moved. As Rel sat on the edge of its fleshy plates, he gazed out across the cold, emerald-green ocean toward the unchanging line of the horizon; not even a fish broke the smooth stillness of the waves. He looked down. Through the murky water directly below he glimpsed oceanbottom, where the world's thousandlegs moved like the shadowy cilia of some huge anemone, each individual limb stirring up clouds of sand.

*Drifting...*

He felt worldground beneath him dip an inch, rippling as its plates shifted, then stabilize as it went over a little ridge and adjusted to the water's new depth. The whole process fascinated him, and he often sat at the edge of the world and watched oceanbottom flow away below.

*Drifting...*

He smiled. Drifting, loose in the water, away from the world — it was a nightmare and a warning drilled into every child. When he stood on the edge of the world and looked out across the ocean, though, he saw only the beauty of the water, the knives of sunlight on the waves, or the shadows of *amalanthi* as they glided high above. The water had carried away his father eight years before, they said, but he found it hard to

believe. How could anything so lovely hurt anyone? Now the waves seemed to call him, their foamy crests reaching like fingers to touch the soles of his bare feet. He edged back, laughing, toward drier plates.

Then cold water sluiced over him from behind. He yelped, startled, and almost fell. Catching his balance, he whirled, hands balled into fists, a curse on the tip of his tongue, ready to fight whoever'd done it. He found himself face to face with Sith Dhelo.

The son of the worldmaster was lean and dark, with a narrow face and a chin that thrust out at the universe as if daring it to fight. His black hair had been bound tight behind his head in the manner of the world's elders — and he even wore a tunic of *amalanthi* leather such as they would own.

He smiled sharply at Rel, taunting, daring. He still held a dripping *amalanthi*-hide bucket in his left hand. More than enough evidence to convict him a thousand times over.

Rel drew back. No — he wouldn't fight the son of the worldmaster. Anyone else, but not *him*, not Sith, who could bend his father's will like silvergrass in the wind with his flattery. One word from Sith and he might never darkfish; he'd be forced to stay onworld like a child, doing the work of the old and the weak: preparing foods, gathering silvergrass, weaving mats.

The idea sickened him. He closed his eyes for a second, then turned away, leaving Sith to smirk at his back. It *hurt*, but he could do nothing else. Still, he thought, the hot sun would dry his loincloth soon enough; a little water couldn't hurt.

"Something wrong, child?" Sith called. "You piss yourself?"

Before Rel could stop himself, he whirled and struck out. He heard more than *felt* flesh meet flesh. It was over in a second, almost before he realized it, and Sith sprawled across the ground's hard plates, a startled look on his face. He started to slide toward the ocean, but hooked his fingers between plates and caught himself.

"Shit," Rel said. Suddenly his hand hurt. He pulled it to his chest and rubbed it, all the time cursing





himself for a fool. Already he knew he'd made a mistake. Sith would get even with him now. He'd have to — it would be a point of honor.

He just stood there and stared for a long time, not knowing what else to do. Then he bit his lip, turned, and stalked off. Well, it couldn't be helped now. Luckily nobody else had seen them — nobody could tease Sith and make him even angrier.

Inworld rose the hard, black plates of the land, curving up and then in to form the great cup-shaped valley called Home. The world's three-hundred-odd people lived there. Thin lines of smoke from small cooking fires curled into the pale green sky, marking the place for all to see.

Rel walked along the edge of the world, trying to think of nothing but water and sky, trying to drive all other thoughts from his mind. He heard Sith following him, the other's bare feet slapping against the small, hard plates of the world's hide. Stopping, Rel struggled to control his anger. Why couldn't Sith leave him alone? Why did Sith always put him down, try to make him feel like a fool? He'd never done anything to make the son of the worldmaster hate him so.

Turning, he looked back, but Sith didn't go away. The worldmaster's son hunkered down and stared back at him. A drop of water traced a cold line down Rel's back, making him shiver uncomfortably. Sith's smile grew all the wider.

"What do you want?" Rel finally said. His voice sounded flat, resigned.

"My father wants to see you."

"What for?"

"Waggril's spotted a darkfish. It's pretty far away, but he can tell it's following us."

Rel felt his heart beating faster and leaned forward, suddenly eager. "When'll it get here?"

"Tonight, Waggril says."

"Tonight—"

"My father's already picked the darkfishers. You're one of them."

Sith rose and trotted away, climbing the barren, black hill of the world, heading toward Home. Only then, with Sith gone, did Rel let himself relax — and the wonder of it all struck him. The worldmaster had chosen him as a darkfisher! When the world and the darkfish touched and fought, he'd be with the men, with the darkfishers. They'd cross to the darkfish, pry up its plates, steal its blood and flesh.

He could see himself with the other men — leading the charge across the water, being the first to touch foot on the other world. Darkfishing was a task only men could do, and by custom only six men at once. Being chosen, especially on this night, when the gods would meet in battle, was an honor. It meant the worldmaster had decided he was a man at last. A wife would come next, and children, and perhaps —

He snorted. It was all a dream at the moment. First came the darkfishing, and then the manhood rituals, and then he'd get his mate — if he survived. A darkfish took my father. The ocean is a killer. But when he looked across the ocean he saw nothing but shimmers of color, patterns of light and dark, and he

wondered which girl the worldmaster would choose for him.

\*\*\* \* \* \* \*

Rel closed his eyes, drew one last breath, and raised his arms over his head. Felran, his uncle, stepped close and smeared a thick, oily paste across his nose and cheeks, then around his mouth and over his forehead. Felran's one good eye squinted as he appraised his work, then he nodded grudging approval. They'd already coated the rest of Rel's body — his head came last. The smelly stuff would protect him from the chill of the night, as well as from the spirits of men lost to the waves. Spirits like his father's.

"Done," Felran said, stepping back.

Rel opened his eyes and tried a smile that came out as a grimace. The stink made him nauseous. "Good. I'm ready."

He stood in the exact center of Home. The silvergrass grew thick here, in huge jumbled masses that could not be beaten down or cut away. The huge, tame, leather-winged *amalanthi* nested in the tangles.

A ripple ran through the world. The men wobbled, but managed to keep their balance. It was the same whenever a darkfish came near. In moments, Rel knew, the world would turn to face the darkfish, and then the two great creatures would fight.

Soon, he thought, feeling the world slow, turn.

All the men in the world — all one hundred and six — had come to see them off. Rel felt his heart hammering as he thought of leaping from the world's edge with only a spear and a knife to protect him. The darkfish! He'd heard about them: oh yes, he'd always heard tales the darkfishers spun, tales of the strange, huge, black creatures so like their world, only barren and uninhabited. He'd seen small fleshplates which other fishers had brought back, eaten soft flesh torn from the creatures' bellies, drunk from *amalanthi*-bladders filled with darkfishes' sweet, sweet blood. It made him feel light-headed, the first time he'd drunk. Now the same giddiness came over him again, only a hundred times stronger. His knees felt weak. Swallowing, he found a lump in his throat.

Ton Dhelo, the aged worldmaster, ceremonial robes of *amalanthi* leather gathered around him, had been going down the line of darkfishers. To each he bent and spoke words, leaning on his bone staff for support.

He whispered in Rel's ear, "The spirits of our fathers' fathers' fathers watch over you tonight. Let not the water take your soul." Then he stepped back, bowed his head, and mumbled a final prayer to the spirits.

When the worldmaster looked up, there was a hungry, eager expression on his face. He turned and spoke not only to the darkfishers, but to all that had gathered: "I have done what must be done. Since the first days it has been this way. Home is the world, and the world is life!"

"The world is life," Rel echoed, along with the others. These words, too, he had heard a hundred times over. It had been part of the ritual of darkfishing since the earliest times, when the first elders had



come to the world from the stars.

"Come," Ton Dhelo said. "This is the time. The darkfishers will run tonight!"

The men slapped their hands against their chests, shouting bravely their courage. Rel cried out as loudly as the rest, cried out until his throat burned and tears ran down his cheeks.

Then, too suddenly, it was time to run, to be the darkfisher he'd always known he'd be. Bending, Rel picked up his spear and knife and pricked his thumb on the points of each, raising tiny drops of night-dark blood: they would do. His mother had carved them from bones of *amalanthi* just for this night, when first he darkfished. The others took up their spears and knives, their small bundles of bladders for darkfish blood, their sacks for carrying the flesh of the creature or plates torn from its back.

Only one thing marred the night's perfection for Rel: the thought of Sith going with them. The worldmaster's son, too, had been chosen for the honor of this night's work, along with four other men, seasoned darkfishers all: tall, heavy-set Barl Omedson; thin Del Shiffen, with his nervous, fluttery hands; Aran Leya, the story-teller; and Rel's only uncle, Felran, with his strong arms and one good eye.

His uncle took his elbow and whispered, "Stay close to me and you'll do all right."

"Yes, uncle," he said, softly.

The whole group moved up the slope, out of Home, in single file. Those chosen to darkfish came last. As he topped the edge of the hill, Rel found himself straining to see over the waves. The stars provided a thin silvery light, sprinkling the ocean with tiny broken flakes of color.

And then he saw the darkfish. It glided across the ocean like a shadow, dark and mysterious and silent. It moved as a phantom, and the world underfoot trembled at its nearness.

All the men had stopped and turned to look at the approaching creature. Rel swallowed. Still it came. He could see the rising crest of its hill — so like their Home! — and begin to make out the faint pattern of plates around its edge. It was larger than he'd expected, larger than Home by far. How could their world hope to defend itself against such an attacker? How could he possibly cross and walk upon such a monster?

He thought of begging not to be sent, but one look at Sith forced that idea from him. Sith would taunt him, brand him a coward: he could never let that happen. Swallowing, he forced his shoulders back and faced the darkfish head on.

The creature stretched across the whole ocean before him. Soon, he realized uneasily, he would be there to walk its plates and taste its blood —

The world shuddered violently, throwing him off his feet. He got up slowly, retrieving his spear and knife. No. He had to turn his fear to eagerness, try to act like a darkfisher *should* act. It was an honor to go tonight, he told himself again and again, for when he finished, he'd be a man.

Only he didn't feel like a man. He felt like a child

new from a mother's breast, afraid of the dark, afraid of its monsters. The old tales of spirits haunting darkfish came back to him. *A darkfish took my father. Will I meet his spirit here?* He trembled all over.

The two great creatures drew close. Their edges almost touched.

"Go now," the worldmaster said to his son, to them all. "May you not be left behind."

The others sprinted toward the edge of the world, straight for the darkfish. Rel hesitated a moment, then plunged after them. He ran as hard as he could and soon caught up with Barl Omedson and his uncle.

But Sith Dhelo had already far outstripped Del and Aran Leya, trying to show his bravery by being the first to cross to the darkfish. Sith reached the edge of the world, leaped across the small stretch of water, touched foot on the darkfish. Grinning, he turned toward Rel and the others, raising his knife and spear in salute.

"Get out of the way!" Del Shiffen shouted. He reached the edge of the world and leaped across just as Sith scrambled back to a safe distance.

Aran followed him across, then Felran. Rel came next. He leaped, saw water chopping below him for an instant, then suddenly found himself scrambling for purchase on the darkfish's fleshy plates. He made it up the slope, joining the others. When he looked back, Barl Omedson had already crossed.

The plates beneath their feet trembled. Already their world fought this darkfish, he knew, one straining against the other in a battle of wills, of strength. All too quickly the fight would end and the darkfish go their separate ways. They had to be finished by then or they would be carried off to the unknown, to death, on the back of this strange darkfish.

"Sith, come with me," Barl called. He'd dropped a bundle of woven silvergrass sacks and, with a sudden flick of his knife, cut the string holding them together. He and Sith took half of them and headed up the slope, toward the larger fleshplates. Rel knew they'd pry one out of position and cut thick slices of the soft, sweet meat below.

Rel's uncle took the other half of the silvergrass sacks. Motionsing for Rel to follow, he moved to the right. Del and Aran went to the left, to drain the creature's blood into the bladders they carried.

Felran stopped in front of a two-foot-round plate ten paces from the ocean. He dropped the silvergrass sacks at Rel's feet, knelt, and began working his knife in the space between plates. When it sank in to the hilt, the darkfish trembled, as if in pain. Felran withdrew the knife and stuck his spear in the hole. As he stood, he heaved to the right, then the left, then the right again, working the fleshplate up out of position. He gave a grunt and threw all his weight onto the spear.

The plate popped out of place with a little sucking sound. Stringy bits of flesh still joined it to the darkfish and dark blood pooled in the hole.

"Cut it loose," Felran said.

Rel seized his knife and sawed at the tough strings of flesh until they parted. Blood spattered over his hands and arms, making them slippery. When he'd



cut the plate completely free, his uncle pulled his spear away and started prying another one loose. Rel lifted the first one out of position — it was surprisingly light — and stuffed it into a sack.

The darkfish shook again, harder than before. Felran continued working at a frantic pace, speaking quickly and quietly.

He said: "My father told me this, and it has been passed down from the very first days. The darkfish's blood is special. There is something in it called *alcohol* — it keeps them warm in the water, keeps their blood flowing. It's the alcohol that tingles the tongue and makes their blood so good. Do you understand that?"

"Alcohol," Rel said. "Sure." It was another of the strange words, like "starship" and "radio" and "cetie," which the elders sometimes used. He didn't believe in all the miracles they spoke of. How could there be anything you couldn't see or hear or touch? Blood was blood, and darkfish blood was sweet.

As he waited to cut the next plate free, Rel looked up at the sky. The stars were bright, beautiful. Did people really live out there? He found it impossible to believe.

"Stop daydreaming, boy!" Felran snapped.

Rel looked down. His uncle had another plate out of light, ready for him to cut. He bent to the task.

Finally the signal came to return to Home.

\*\*\* \*\*

Rel and his uncle had cut eleven more plates loose in that time. Now they lugged them back toward the place where the darkfish almost touched the edge of the world. Rel could see the men of the world on Home's slopes, waiting expectantly.

One by one he and Felran picked up a sack and heaved it over the water and onto the edge of the world. A moment later Del and Aran joined them and began throwing sealed bladders across as well. When they were done, all four leaped over the five-foot stretch of water, gathered their trophies, and started up the slope in a triumphant procession.

Halfway to the top, Rel turned to look back at the darkfish. Sith and Barl Omedson stood near the world now, throwing their bundles of darkfish meat to safety.

"Go help them," Felran said.

"Yes, sir," Rel said. He set down his burden and turned, jogging down the slope toward the edge of the world.

Barl tossed the last of the sacks across and jumped up to safety. As he began dragging them toward Home, Sith turned and padded silently back up the darkfish's sloping plates. His shape grew more and more indistinct in the dark, until at last he couldn't be seen at all.

Rel stared after him, bewildered. Didn't he know the darkfish never fought long? Didn't he know he might be left behind, to join the spirits of the dead? He shivered; it was an unpleasant thought, something he could never wish on anyone — not even Sith.

Suddenly Barl Omedson looked back and noticed Sith's absence. He shouted, "I told you to leave it!

There's not enough time, Sith — get back here!"

Rel said, "What did he forget?"

"He wanted to bring the plate we cut out. I wouldn't let him — said we didn't have time. The fool! He's going to be left behind when the darkfish leaves!"

"We could help him. There's still time!"

Barl looked up at the heavens as if beseeching the gods, shrugged. "Perhaps. But you don't take chances with darkfish. I saw three men left, once — your father among them — when a darkfish ran too soon. It's risky."

*Drifting...*

Rel thought of his father, lost to the ocean, drifting forever on a darkfish. He'd be dead now, without a worldmaster to protect him from the spirits of those lost to the ocean. It was the most horrible death he knew of.

The world trembled, and he saw the darkfish tremble in response. He swallowed. There was still time. And, after all, the ocean could never hurt him, never leave him away from Home. He could still help Sith. And, perhaps, the worldmaster's son wouldn't hate him so much if he did. Even if Sith just ignored him it wouldn't be so bad — anything would be better than the constant taunts, the constant petty tricks —

Almost without thinking he leaped across to the darkfish. Behind him, he heard his uncle screaming for him to come back, Barl Omedson calling him a fool. He tucked his head down and pounded up the slope.

He found Sith struggling with a huge fleshplate, one easily five feet across. The boy staggered under his load, hardly able to walk.

"Easy," Rel called, reaching for one of the plate's sides, "let me help."

Cursing, Sith jerked it away from him. "It's mine! Get away — I'm not going to let you take it!"

"Don't be stupid! You'll never get it back by yourself!"

"Yes, I will! You just want to claim it for yourself. You've always been jealous. Now get away from me!" He staggered across the slope under the heavy weight.

"There's not enough time!"

"Get away!"

Rel stared in silence, shocked. He felt the darkfish's plates begin to shift underfoot — not trembling, as they'd done before, but actually *move*, as if the creature had changed direction. A sudden cold feeling swept through him.

Turning, he sprinted down the slope, calling for Sith to follow before it was too late. He had a sinking feeling inside and ran faster than ever.

The plates grew smaller underfoot as he approached the water. He could see the world clearly now. Slowly, ever so slowly, it was drawing away from him. He saw his uncle, and Barl Omedson, and Del Shiffen, and Aran Leya, all standing on the edge. They shouted to him, but their words all blurred together in

(Continued to page 55)



## ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

# Plan 9 From Roslindale

The recent efforts of some of our contributors reveal that bad sci-fi/horror is an underrated source of humor.

You know what I'm talking about if this little scenario sounds familiar:

You're having a sleepless night, so you turn on the TV looking for something amusing.

What you run across is something sci-fi and low-budget from the 1950s, like *The Creeping Terror* or *Catwomen of the Moon*.

Your finger pauses on the channel switcher, as you snicker at the corny dialogue.

But you keep watching, gradually sucked in, wondering how much worse it can get.



Bruce Bethke

By the time the monster comes crashing through the flimsy set and you spot the zipper on its rubber costume, you are howling with laughter.

In "It Came From the Slush Pile," Bruce Bethke brings us face to face with a grade B horror of un-editable proportions.

Bethke says he was inspired

mainly by "10 years of writing and trying to peddle science fiction stories." Some of those rejection slips are taken verbatim from Bethke's own collection.

Bethke recently sold a novella, "Elimination Round" to *Amazing Stories*. It's the follow-up to the short story "Cyberpunk," ("Yes, the original cyberpunk," he says) which appeared in that magazine four years ago.

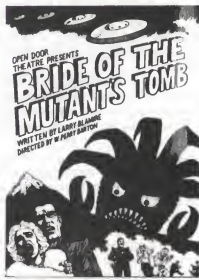
Bethke has a wife named Nancy and two daughters; he recently acquired a house and a dog to complete the picture.

He resides in St. Paul, Minn. and makes his living as a technical writer of software documentation. He's quite proud of something he wrote called "Soundchaser Tool Kit," designed to help educators write software for a computer music system.

The artist for "It Came from the Slush Pile" is Larry Blamire. In the last issue, I mentioned that artist Blamire, better known in the Boston area for his playwriting and acting talents, had a new play premiering in June.

*Bride of the Mutant's Tomb* opened for a six-week run at Boston's Open Door Theatre, to mostly good reviews from the Boston press. This reviewer thought it was a scream.

In *Bride*, Blamire chronicles the efforts of producer/director Harry Leeds, a character loosely based on director Ed Wood Jr.,



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### Larry's play

the man who brought us such beauts as *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

Leeds and a group of has-been and novice actors are making a movie that is, in a word, awful.

There are tacky costumes, redundant dialogue, evil aliens with names like "Kro-bar" and "Anthrax."

Behind the scenes of the moviemaking, the audience also gets some major chuckles from a space-shot scriptwriter who thinks he really has visited the planet Marva and a sarcastic cameraman with a devastating wit and no illusions about the quality of the movie he's making.

Blamire is not out just to poke fun at the people who made this kind of movie, however.

"Given the money and conditions Mr. Wood worked under, it is a miracle his films were made at all," Blamire says.

"Personally, I consider many big-budget movies of today to be far worse films—they have no excuses."

Blamire's next project is a staged reading at the Gloucester Stage Company of his newest play.

*Whyo* is about Irish street gangs in the 1890s.

Blamire's fellow Art Institute of Boston alum and *ABO* illustrator Cortney Skinner is the artist for "Doing Time," by John Stith in this issue.

Skinner recently designed the "mutant" for *Bride*. He says it was a compilation of about four different low-budget creatures.

"There was one, I think the movie was called *From Hell it Came*. It was a bad walking tree with stubby arms and it could only shuffle."

Skinner's creation reminded me of an overripe, angry carrot.

He is now working on a "unique" oil portrait of a friend, done in the form of a 1920s movie poster.

John Stith's story about a prison of the future gives new meaning to the expression "doing hard time."

Stith has a growing list of novels to his name. Most recently, *Memory Blank* (Berkley/



John Stith

*Ace*) came out in January of 1986 and *Death Tolls* (Berkley/Ace) is due out in September of this year.

He is working on a novel called *Redshift Rendezvous*, in which, he says, "relativity figures prominently."

He lives in Colorado Springs with wife Annette, who is the owner-operator of Book Sleuth, a



Paul A. Gilster

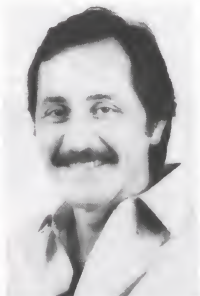
mystery specialty bookstore.

The death of a scientist is the subject of Paul A. Gilster's "Merchant Dying."

Gilster lives in Raleigh, N.C. and has been a full-time writer for the past year and a half.

Before that he was an aviation flight and ground instructor, and before that he taught medieval English and Icelandic at the University of North Carolina.

Science fiction is his first love, but he does a lot of non-fiction writing to pay the bills, in-



James A. Stevens

cluding book reviews and a wine column for a local magazine.

He says he has "about three short stories going at any one



The shadow of Cortney's monster

(Continued to page 36)



## THE REEL STUFF

By Jessie Horsting

# Dog Days

Because *ABO* is approaching its one-year anniversary, I was prompted to look back over the columns I've contributed. I noticed that the only consistency was a reference to the seasons in each column, a reflection of the cycle of film releases which peak in December and June and flop around like beached squid during the winter and late summer.

We started with Turkey Season, got snowed under by The Winter of Our Discontent, ended up getting burned by Bitchin' Summer (which our alien publisher discreetly changed to Witchin' Summer in the title) and now we swelter in the Dog Days.

Film releases during the Dog Days are typified by hoped-for June releases that didn't make

the cut. Filmmakers know that your five bucks will only sustain so many megahits per month, so if a particular production is not a frontrunner, it will be entered in a later race. That's why you don't see *Stand By Me* opening against *Aliens* or *The Fly* against *Star Trek IV*.

August is the Janus month where we can find both the gems and the sow's ears playing a double bill. (Flying in the face of my observations is *The Chipmunk Adventure*, which opened in late May against films like *Beverly Hills Cop II* and *The Untouchables* and is doing very well, thank you.)

But you still have to be suspicious when films are pushed back for August/September

release. Sometimes it's an altruistic move — "Let's give this little film a chance to find its audience" — but more often than not, the pall of doom has settled like scum on some yet-to-be-released Celluloid and the producers want to cut their losses. Why is *Superman IV* opening the same week as an art film from Germany and a re-release of *Benji's Big Adventure*? Why has *Jaws '87* been dry-docked until September? These are good questions, and ones you should ask yourself when deciding what to do on Saturday night.

### Eating the hand ...

Even as director George Miller has been gathering with one hand the rose petals of praise heaped on him for his exemplary work on *The Witches of Eastwick*, the other hand is ramming them down the throats of producers Jon Peters, Peter Guber and Neil Canton.

Apparently he hopes they choke on them.

Talking to the *Los Angeles Times*, Miller said, "You know what they say — 'A camel is a horse designed by committee.' Well, I had my work cut out on this film to stop it from turning into a camel." Miller complained about interference from the producers during filming, stating that the Americans (Miller is an Australian) mistake politeness for weakness. Miller tends to be



Seeing the light ...



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polite.

"Eventually I had to become non-communicative and willful. I cut myself off completely," said Miller, a necessity after repeated differences over the direction of the film. Some of Miller's resentment may come from the fact that though the production team has exhibited great business sense (Peters and Guber produced *Flashdance*, Neil Canton produced *Back to the Future*), not one of them has served much time as a director.

Peters was Barbara Streisand's hairdresser before he jumped to his career as executive producer with partner Peter Guber, and Neil Canton — though a good-natured fellow and well meaning — hasn't spent his time behind a camera. Miller *knows* how to make movies — he managed to produce and direct both *Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome* without the help of a hairdresser.

Critical reaction has given Miller the last laugh, with praise such as the following from *The L.A. Weekly's* F.X. Feeney: It's a great tribute to the prodigious gifts of George Miller that (Jack) Nicholson is free to pop every grenade in his arsenal and yet he never once overwhelms the movie. Miller is equal to him at every generation."

Miller's outspokenness is a rarity in the L.A. film community, where the normal M.O. is to smile and nod no matter what happens because you never know who you'll be working for next week. (The assistant producer you berate and belittle because he forgot the schedule sheets may have just cut a multi-million dollar script deal at Columbia — and up until a second ago had strongly considered you as his first-choice director.)

Miller doesn't have to worry about working in this town, though — he's back in Australia overseeing his thriving production company with several feature film and television projects in the works.

He doesn't need Hollywood.

Do I have to point out how

much Hollywood needs him?

## The trouble with Harry

*Harry and the Hendersons*, as I have probably mentioned, was guided to release by Steven Spielberg's Amblin' Entertainment. In fact, Steven had a strong hand in the production, from the time he solicited director William Dear for the project, through the many rewrites and rethinks any project endures, right down to on-set visits and suggestions throughout the final editing and scoring phases.

So why isn't *Harry and the Hendersons* a Steven Spielberg presentation? It could only help the box office on the movie to have Spielberg's name over the title, and Spielberg clearly took a personal interest in it — but his name is conspicuously absent from the ads.

Director Bill Dear (*Time Rider*, *Amazing Stories*) has had an uphill battle denying in the press that his film is a rip-off of Spielberg's own *E.T.*, even though the media is well aware that Dear's story was nurtured under Spielberg's wing. In fact, the greatest criticism leveled against the film thus far is that it is so typically Spielberg. So what gives?

Rumors festering around town:

1. That Spielberg and Dear butted heads so frequently, Spielberg took his name off the film.

2. That Dear never wanted Spielberg's name on it.

3. That everything was fine until Bill Dear's *Amazing Stories* episode "Mummy, Daddy" was singled out as the best of the season — better than Spielberg's own "The Mission" — and as a result, the two men's egos got in the way of their good sense.

4. That Spielberg is selective about what he puts his name on — implying that *Harry* wasn't up to the standard.

5. That Bill Dear wants people to know Bill Dear directed the film.

Bill Dear has only com-

mented on the unfairness of the rip-off accusations. *Harry and the Hendersons* was first presented to him as a proposal for a television series and he decided instead to develop it as a full-length script with writers Ezra Rappaport and William E. Martin. He was just finishing the script when Spielberg approached him about directing a feature film for Amblin'.

It may be that Dear was concerned about the fate of films that do bear Spielberg's name. Regardless of who directed them, they become Spielberg films. Quick — who directed *Gremlins*? *Goonies*? *Young Sherlock Holmes*? Who produced *Close Encounters*? *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? The other names connected with these films have paled behind the blazing neon of SPIELBERG. Perhaps Bill Dear was trying to avoid being overlooked as has happened to so many others. However, judging by the criticism and commentary that have already pushed his name to the back rows, he's been unsuccessful.

(There's a penchant among critics for SS tactics — Spielberg Stomping — that I take great pains to avoid. He's a fine director and a well-meaning producer, but media attention and his own organization have turned his name into a monomorphic entity that runs roughshod on the talents around him and invites the cheap shots that have come to typify press coverage.)

Adding to *Harry's* woes was the Disney made-for-T.V. movie *Bigfoot*, which aired in early spring. Dear heard of the script and was appalled to learn that not only was the plot suspiciously similar to his own, but the lead character had been named Harry Anderson.

Several luncheons and a few phone calls later, Disney did some script changes and changed the lead character's name. Sources say there had been talk of a lawsuit, but Dear's next film, under negotiation, may be produced by Disney. It was in everyone's best interest to find an

amicable settlement.

## Smarter than he looks

I'm the first to admit that *Predator* sounded like so much Alpo on paper — yet another *Aliens* clone featuring the rippling flesh of Arnold Schwarzenegger pitted against the rippling scales of an extraterrestrial menace.

Who could know that director John McTiernan and his editing staff could cut together all that troublesome footage into a tense thriller that is the sleeper of the summer? I reported in this column the difficulties with the *Predator* costume. McTiernan and his crew were sweltering in the jungle location, waiting for the latex and foam concoction to arrive from the States. When they finally received the suit, they had an appliance that was ... well, a rubber suit. A painfully inadequate rubber suit that still looked like a rubber suit no matter what McTiernan tried to do with it.

Production shut down and the critter was rethought until Stan Winston (*Aliens*) came up with a creation that met the demands of the \$15 million production. That careful decision on the part of McTiernan and producer Joel Silver has paid off in great box-office for *Predator*.

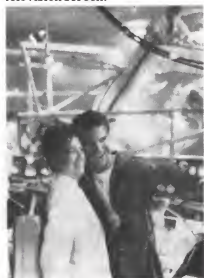
So I was wrong. So? Does that mean I shouldn't look for trouble on Schwarzenegger's next film, *The Running Man*, based on the Bachman (Stephen King) book of the same name? Just because the production is on its fifth director and the budget has swelled from \$11 million to \$28 million, is that any reason to jump to the conclusion that Tri Star is having problems with this film?

Hell no. I'm not going to speculate. Nosirree. I let the facts speak for themselves.

## Short takes

George R.R. Martin is back in Los Angeles for an assignment as executive story consultant on a new network series, *Beauty and the Beast*, to air this fall. George

describes it as a modern revamping of the legend, with the Beast haunting an urban underground while his Beauty copes with the regular beasts that lurk on the corners of the city. There are no immediate plans past the first thirteen weeks and George, after his stint on *Twilight Zone*, is now a more cautious veteran of Hollywood's combat zone — your television screen.



Show me ...

David Gerrold has left his position on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in order to produce his own series, *Trackers*. He says it's a little early to talk about the show, but he confirms that he has his own desk in his own office over at Columbia and is busily developing the property for the joint Columbia/CBS venture.

The fledgling Fox network introduces its first genre entry this summer with a series called *Werewolf*. The advertising promises "you won't believe your eyes," which is definitely a gauntlet for genre fans — it's hard to believe that a modestly budgeted television show is going to have transformation scenes that outdo *An American Werewolf in London* or *The Howling*. But it's okay as long as they try, huh gang?

Are you ready for *Psycho* TV? Want a little mayhem to go with the old Swanson frozen dinner? Some blood and guts with the popcorn and beer? In the next

year look for *Bates Motel*, a spinoff from the *Psycho* films; *Friday the Thirteenth: The Television Series*, featuring the senseless slaughter of the week; a series based on David Cronenberg's *Scanners*, scripted by Cronenberg for ABC — I imagine the opening and closing credit sequences will get by the censors — and there is still talk about John Carpenter's *Halloween* being groomed as a series. I guess that'll be babysitter of the week.

*Alien's* Michael Biehn stars in *The Boarder*, due out next year. We'll talk more about this film next column, as well as *Made in Heaven*. We may be looking at the next turn in science fiction and fantasy — back to the roots of Thirties fantasy which featured characterization and dialogue. Here's hoping for a giant leap backwards to great storytelling, where it all started in the first place.

— ABO —

## Moving?



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# Aborigines

(Continued from page 31)  
time and a novel in progress."

James A. Stevens has written of alien contact and a diplomat's dilemma in "Borboleta."

Stevens is a creative consultant to the advertising business in Puerto Rico. That means he does everything from write, produce and direct print ad and commercial campaigns to compose jingles.

He had two stories in the now-defunct *Stardate* magazine in 1986: "Cycles" and "It's Not How You Play the Game."

Last August his story "Into That Good Night" appeared in the anthology *Afterlives*, by Pamela Sargent and Ian Watson.

He is now working on an original screenplay for a comedy about college and on a science fiction radio soap opera in Spanish.

He is married to Tita Stevens, a professional make-up artist. They have two children, two Borinquen terriers, a fat guinea pig and two nameless parakeets "who in the immortal words of Rocky Balboa 'look like flying candy.'"

He recently had a great time taking the whole family skiing in Canada.

Cover artist Bob Eggleton has illustrated two stories in this issue, "Merchant Dying" and "Borboleta."



Bob Eggleton with Miscon co-chair Robyn Meadow

Eggleton's "Sing" cover from *ABO* issue #3 has garnered several awards, including Best of Show-People's Choice at Miscon II in Missoula, Mont. and Best

Science Fiction in the pro category at Ad Astra SF con in Toronto.

Eggleton's numerous current projects include illustrating an edition of Arthur Clarke's *Fountains of Paradise*, cover art for several SF mags, and being visual consultant/designer for a planetarium show on the history of science fiction, to be narrated by Leonard Nimoy.

For "Borboleta," Eggleton wanted to depict a ship which was described as looking like a loaf of bread with hardware sticking out



John Gregory Betancourt

of it. So he chose Italian as his model, then ate the model.

For "Merchant Dying," he used himself as the model. He has gotten comments about his repeated use of himself in his work, and his answer is "I'm the only model that's right there when I need him."

"Merchant Dying" is the second story by Paul Gilster that Eggleton has illustrated. The first was in 1981 in a magazine called *Just Pulp* and it was Eggleton's first published science fiction illustration.

"The Darkfishers" by John Gregory Betancourt is a coming-of-age story set in the Home System, a solar system described by Hal Clement in *ABO*'s first issue.

Betancourt made his first professional sale in 1979 when he was 17 and now makes his living writing, editing and agenting science fiction and fantasy.

His proudest writing accomplishment to date is a fantasy series set in Zelloque which so far consists of two novels and seven short stories.

His "The Brothers Lamniat at the Fortress of Lord Mur" will be the cover story of the July 1987 *Amazing Stories*, and he has a fantasy novel *Rogue Pirate*, (Windwalker Books) which has just come out.

His first-written novel, *The Blind Archer*, will appear in February from Avon Books.

He says he recently talked lots of people into restarting the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*.

His hobbies include listening to old Monkees records.

Illustrating "The Darkfishers" is the first professional science fiction assignment for artist Pat Morrissey.

Morrissey's mother was an artist before her, and she remembers sitting as a child and watching her mom magically transform a piece of plain white canvas.

"I was destined to be a fantasy artist," she explains. "I grew up in an artistic world... had a passion for *Star Trek* and the passion took form when I worked as a planetarium artist."

She was also "totally infatuated with Tolkien's magical world of wizards and goblins and hobbits."

Morrissey lives and works in



Pat Morrissey

a central Massachusetts farmhouse she shares with her artist husband Wayne and her son Jeffrey.

Her work has been displayed in many private and public exhibits as well as at several science fiction/fantasy conventions.

Jim Brunet brings us a creature at home in the vastness of intergalactic space in "Symphony in Ursa Major."



Brunet took his lifelong fantasy about the Chicago Cubs going to the World Series and turned it into his first professional sale, "A Pennant from the Gremlin," for *Fantasy Book* in 1984.

He is now working on a story about a female army officer who uses "cold sleep" to travel from campaign to campaign.



Jim Brunet

Brunet makes his living "translating high-tech into English for computer trade magazines and corporate brochures."

He and wife Anne Pautler, a novice mystery writer, live in Los Angeles.

They have a baby girl, "who, we are happy to say, is finally sleeping through the night," he says.



Morris Scott Dollens

"Symphony" is illustrated by Morris Scott Dollens, who may

have the longest running career among living space artists.

He was born in Indiana in 1920 and began publishing his own fanzine at age 16.

He settled in California where he worked in the MGM sound studios and later on his own as a photographer.

He began to seriously build up his artistic career in the 1950s. He sold his paintings privately, and some were published as magazine or book covers in the U.S. and in Germany.

Lately, his work has made frequent appearances in *Omni* magazine.

I was introduced to Joe Haldeman, award-winning author of *The Forever War* and *Mindbridge*, in Boston recently.

He had just come back from three weeks in Rome, and he has finished writing a screenplay and treatment for a science fiction adventure movie called *Crash and Burn*, an \$8 million effort by Stewart Gordon Productions and Empire Studios due out at Christmas.

He also has a novel that just came out titled *Tool of the Trade* (William Morrow). He says the idea for this science fiction/international thriller came from an exercise for a class in science fiction writing which he teaches at MIT.

It was a description of a bar-room scene, and it lay on a stack of papers for several years before he picked it up again.

Haldeman says he recently gave up smoking and splits his time between Cambridge, Mass. and Florida, where he hides himself away and takes advantage of the "great ambience" to write.

I also met author Frank Robinson.

Robinson's longtime collaborator, Thomas Scortia, died in April of 1986. Among their combined efforts were *The Glass Inferno* and *The Gold Crew*, both of which were adapted into motion pictures.

Robinson says he spent some time completing a book that Scortia left in a first-draft stage.

It's titled *Blowout* and it's just out from Franklin Watts publishers.

-ABO-

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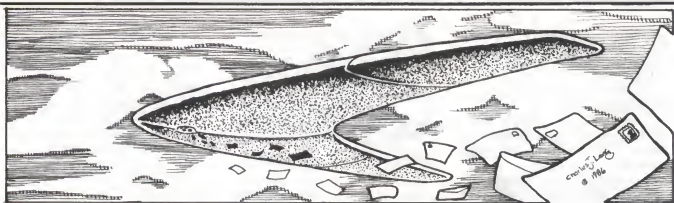
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# Boomerangs

## Comments From Our Readers

To the editor,

Guys — I'm not a letter writer, but I like what you're doing.

Your original format brought back fond memories of the old "Underground Press" days but the change will serve us all better in the long run.

I've been reading SF since I was old enough to know there was any such thing (close to 30 years now), and yours is the best new mag to come along in many a year.

I hope my subscription (renewal) helps you reach your goals sooner and keeps me supplied with good, solid SF reading.

Please don't slip into the FM (Fantasy Mode), as there is quite enough of that running around these days.

Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,  
Richard Heath  
Fort Worth, Texas

p.s. I've never written a letter to the editor before, but if this qualifies, feel free to edit as needed and print any parts you like. You certainly deserve a pat on the back. — RH

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Darrell Schweitzer's otherwise unexceptionable review of *Trillion Year Spree* inadvertently

does injustice to some early magazine editors and publishers.

Gernsback was a publisher, not an editor; during most of his career, his magazines were edited by others.

When he began *Amazing Stories*, an act of considerable courage, there were no professional science fiction writers; for some years, necessarily, he published the work of amateurs along with the reprinted European fiction he used to keep the quality up.

But one of these amateurs was E. E. Smith, whose *Skylark of Space*, whatever its literary value (small), was a turning point in science fiction; Smith remained a dominant figure in magazine s.f. until the late forties, and his many imitators are still a major force.

In the mid-thirties *Wonder Stories* published Stanley Weinbaum's seminal early work, another turning point. It also published the work of David R. Daniels, including "The Branches of Time," the first alternate time-track story.

From 1933 to 1937, another revolution took place in *Astounding Stories*, edited by F. Orlin Tremaine and his assistant Harry Bates, before John Campbell took over. Murray Leinster, Frank R. Kelly (the Delany of the thirties), Ross Rocklynne, Jack Williamson, Raymond Z. Gallun and many others contributed notable work; Gallun in par-

ticular was far ahead of his time.

Yes, these magazines published mostly junk, but what else is new?

Sincerely,  
Damon Knight  
Eugene, OR

Darrell responds:

First, a slip of the typewriter on Damon's part. He knows as well as I do that Harry Bates was not Orlin Tremaine's assistant, but his predecessor.

Bates was the editor of *Astounding* during the Clayton days, his issues being January 1930 to March 1933. His assistant, D.W. Hall, stayed on as Tremaine's assistant. Bates wrote an occasional story for the magazine but otherwise was not connected with it afterwards.

Damon's (implied) attempt to exonerate Hugo Gernsback on the grounds that he did not edit his own magazines — i.e. that Gernsback was only the publisher and others did the editing — is certainly novel. It would require that the whole history of American SF be rewritten from scratch if it were true, but frankly, it goes against all evidence. In all of Gernsback's issues of *Amazing* he is listed as "Hugo Gernsback, Editor."

He is even so listed on the covers. It's true that he had a staff, as most editors do, and he didn't do all the drudge-work, but, as Sam Moskowitz tells it in *Ex-*

plorers of the Infinite (p. 227 of the Hyperion Press edition):

"Gernsback himself made the final decision on all manuscripts, wrote the editorials and the majority of the blurbs for the stories, and selected the scenes to be used for the cover and interior illustrations."

That sure sounds like editing to me. Are we to believe that Moskowitz is wrong about the activities of his friend and close associate? And, in all issues of Gernsback's *Wonder Stories*, he is listed as the "editor in chief." Of course he had a staff, even managing editors (David Lasser and Charles Hornig), but according to Ashley and Tymn's *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Weird Fiction Magazines* (Greenwood Press), the situation was as outlined above for *Amazing*.

I respect Damon, but in this case, I tend to believe Moskowitz, Tymn, Ashley, and the internal evidence in the magazines themselves.

So we are back to my original point: Campbell-era SF is widely reprinted and available to the general public today. Pre-Campbell SF is relatively rare, and to the uninitiated, to people who weren't fans in the '30s or don't have antiquarian interests, it is unfamiliar and, when encountered, incomprehensibly awful. Just try some out on a college class, or even contemporary fans, and see what reaction you get. Such people are not used to pulp fiction, and the Gernsback stuff was largely sub-pulp. You need historical perspective to appreciate it, if "appreciate" is the right word for most of it.

Doc Smith seems to be the only Gernsback writer who is still widely read. His works are pretty good juveniles. If you read them at a certain age, they're great fun. I'm not sure I'd count Lovecraft as a Gernsback writer (Gernsback did publish "The Colour Out of Space," then treated Lovecraft so shabbily that years later Lovecraft was

still warning aspiring writers away), but if you do, then he's the only one to go on to develop a critical reputation.

I am aware of the accomplishments of Harry Bates and later Orlin Tremaine at *Astounding*. In fact I've gotten interested in the Bates *Astounding* and will be writing an article on it soon for *Foundation*. But I think that we have to admit, honestly, that even *Astounding* was pretty tawdry compared to the few SF books published in the '30s, say, Huxley's *Brave New World*, much of Stapledon, John Collier's *Full Circle*, Capek's *The War With the Newts*, William Sloane's *To Walk the Night* and *The Edge of Running Water*, etc.

There was nothing in the magazines to compare with them. Pulp SF just wasn't on that level. This is the point Aldiss is making in *Trillion Year Spree*, and to that extent I'll agree with him.

I see the progress of Bates, Tremaine, and Campbell as one of repair, and only then of growth. Gernsback had established in SF magazines the lowest possible standards. Bates raised things back up to a professional level, and brought in the professional writers Gernsback couldn't get. (Most were pulp generalists, trained by Bates to write SF; a couple, like Ray Cummings, who presumably made his living from his SF serials in *Argosy*,\* were SF specialists.) Bates re-established the importance of plot and emotion in SF, for all the plots in *Astounding* tended to be formula and the characters stereotyped. Tremaine, in the "thought variant" era, maintained Bates's gains and pushed for genuinely imaginative concepts.

Campbell took over from there, raising standards even higher, until he produced true classics which have since been read all over the planet by people who weren't even born when they were written.

But Gernsback? He established the SF category. Otherwise he made no positive contribution.

Best,  
Darrell Schweitzer

\* Yes, I also know Cummings's *Around the Universe*, a reprint from *Science & Invention*, appeared in *Amazing* in 1927.

Damon Knight counters:

Dear Charles,

If I goofed about Harry Bates, and I probably did, then I think D.W. Hall may be an unsung hero. F. Orlin Tremaine, the nominal editor of *Astounding* from 1933 to 1937, never showed anywhere else the talent, intelligence, and taste that were evident in every issue of that magazine.

The term "editor in chief" applied by a publisher to himself means anything he wants it to mean. I don't think it matters especially how much editing Gernsback did; his place in s.f. history is not in peril. (I wasn't trying to "exonerate" him — from what?) It is clear, though, that even Charles Hornig put his individual stamp on *Wonder Stories*; the strain of sadomasochism in that magazine appeared and disappeared with him.

Having edited an anthology of magazine s.f. of the thirties, I don't agree with Darrell that it was all junk, & I think it is unfortunate that even knowledgeable critics nowadays tend to assume that magazine s.f. never underwent any significant improvement until Campbell. That's what I was trying to say.

Best,  
Damon

Dear Charlie,

Here I am again! You seem to have a thing for printing my letters in every issue, so now I feel obligated to keep 'em coming ... you old smoothie, you (*Old! — Ed.*)

(Continued to page 55)

# Symphony in Ursa Major

By James Brunet

Art by Morris Scott Dollens

She-who-was-self swam in a sea of sensation. Deep between the stars she glided, bathed in the light of a million frequencies as the quantum events of spacetime percolated around her.

Her sea of sensation was chaos, now as it had always been, back to her earliest memories when hot matter was still condensing out of energy-filled space. Rippling gravity waves of a fading collapsar washed over her. Intense X-ray sources cut through space to serve as constant beacons. But it was raging, erratic bursts of radiation from all across the spectrum, from deepest gamma to the faintest infrared, that provided the great overwhelming constancy.

Against the chaos, she maintained her memories. Feeding stray bits of interstellar matter into her accretion disk, she held and trapped the resulting energy, using it to sustain the countless clouds of micro-sized black holes whose patterns were records of her thoughts.

She had drifted for eons. Every few millennia, she felt hunger and would pass through a star system, feeding on a rich diet of solar wind and the almost inevitable asteroids and moonlets. Then, having balanced the mass/energy of the numerous black holes that comprised her body, she would again seek the cold empty reaches.

Now, she was drifting into the system of a small yellow sun, moving nearly in the plane of its planets. She passed the outermost planet, cold and remote, seeing its presence only by the disturbance its tiny mass caused in her gravity fields. As she continued inward, an almost tickling sensation played itself across her electromagnetic fields. It was a strange sensation, like and yet unlike—

She-who-was-self abruptly manipulated quantum events to create a few billion additional micro-sized black holes. Even with the added memory and reason

capability, the tickling sensation lingered without being resolved.

Inward through the system she swept. A large planet lay ahead, its mass warping the fabric of space and exerting an increasing pull on her body. To fall into that massive gravity-well would be death. Her finely constructed energy fields would be twisted and torn as the black holes of her body — large, small, and in-between — collapsed into one central mass, devoid of consciousness.

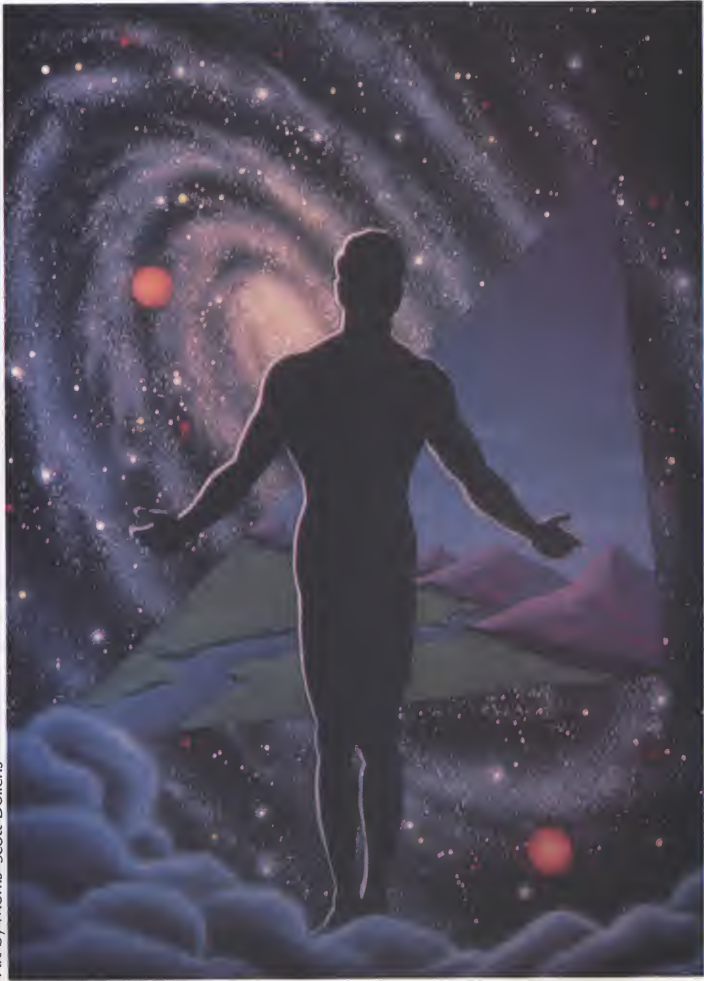
In response, she-who-was-self deployed an array of her finest, smallest black holes, searching and probing nearby space for bodies of mass that were negligible in the grander scheme of things. There! An asteroid. And another. She moved the medium-sized holes that served as her manipulators into position. One by one, she pulled the asteroids in tight, flat trajectories toward her center of mass, then flung them away toward the deeper reaches of the solar system. With each cast asteroid, her momentum changed slightly. One, two ... a dozen asteroids before her own path was diverted sufficiently to avoid the massive planet's grasp. It would not feed on her, not on this passage.

Her E-fields fluttered and wavered as she passed near the planet. Huge electrical storms high in its atmosphere discharged billions of volts of lightning. Ah, a gas giant then. A double deathtrap, for its massive radiation belts and electric fields would have disrupted her memory long before gravity had pulled her to destruction.

Clear of the gas giant, she continued to float toward the sun. Her lazy, looping path would carry her across the inner system and safely out again on the far side.

The strange sensation continued to tickle her intermittently. Anxious and curious, she searched for





the source, sweeping her receptors back and forth, analyzing the gravity patterns and ripples in space. There were four planets in the inner system, she could see them clearly by the pull of their gravity. One, previously masked by the sun, was emerging into direct view for the first time. Third-closest to the sun, this planet had a single enormous moon as its companion. And....

And energy pulses overwhelmed her. The planet was a beacon in the radio frequencies. Across several bands, radio waves poured forth. Not the crackling static given off by electric storms of the gas giants, but smooth, beautiful, modulated transmissions. Not the constancy of chaos, but regular, patterned waves. Non-chaos. In the billions of years of her existence, she-who-was-self had never encountered anything like it.

The smooth signals tickled her fields and gently massaged her body as they were absorbed. The sensations gave her a pleasure that she had never experienced. But her current course would sweep her right through this solar system and back out into the interstellar void, away from this wonderful curiosity.

She-who-was-self reached out desperately, seizing bits of dust and rock, throwing anything she could grab in an attempt to fall into a distant orbit about the planet. But there were no sizable asteroids, not enough mass in this region of space to change her velocity quickly enough.

The radio pulses continued to ripple through her, weaving exquisite patterns. Even as she immersed herself in the exotic symphony, she contemplated again her projected trajectory. Perhaps there was hope after all.

As she listened to the planet's song, she grabbed whatever particles she could, ejecting them so that her resulting path curved ever so slightly sunward. Slowly the effect took hold. She would still pass the third planet by, but her course now would take her closer to the quiet second planet.

At closest approach to the third planet, the radio intensity peaked and then began to fade. She noted that this planet, too, had strong magnetic fields, though not so powerful as the gas giant. She would have to keep her distance on the return.

She-who-was-self continued sunward, listening as the signals slowly faded, though they still comprised the brightest image in many bands.

Now, she approached the second planet. Her trajectory had changed significantly and it was almost sufficient to her needs. But not quite. Her momentum would still carry her past this system's sun and out to deep space. And here there was nothing but dust and the rich stream of particles from the solar wind to grab on to. The cause was lost. She would lose contact with the wonderful source of non-chaos. Unless....

Three medium-sized black holes, half of her manipulators, were spinning away. She could function without them for the present; later she would grow replacements. Now her trajectory was adequate for her desires. She would loop around the second planet, its gravity changing her course so that her path would

carry her even closer to this system's sun. Shortly after closest approach, she would eject another manipulator, reducing her outbound velocity to enable her to make a rendezvous with the marvelous third planet.

She-who-was-self circled in a long, lingering orbit around the third planet and its companion moon. As she listened to the planet sing, she manufactured increasingly greater amounts of memory to handle the complex function of reason, for the planet posed a challenge. The transmission fragments were so regular, so perfectly modulated, it seemed impossible for them to be natural. The chaos of a million frequencies continued to beat at her from interstellar space, providing constant and immediate contrast to the music emanating from the planet.

Could a she-who-was-other be the source of her pleasure, calling out from the planet's surface? She-who-was-self doubted it, for the planet's gravity, while not nearly so strong as that of the gas giant, would be death to her. She watched and listened and waited, trying to puzzle out the mystery.

\*\*\*\*\*

After some decades — but a brief moment in the existence of she-who-was-self — a new phenomenon presented itself. Occasionally, a small body radiating in the infrared regions would rise from the planet's surface and then grow cold as it fell into a close orbit around the planet. Faint radio signals would be transmitted from these bodies until, slowed by the upper reaches of the planet's dense atmosphere, they fell to fiery deaths.

What could this signify? Perhaps the entire planet was conscious and feebly trying to change its orbit by ejecting these small bodies. She-who-was-self marveled at the possibility. Never in her eons of existence had she encountered an intelligent planet.

After a short while, more bodies rose from the planet's surface. But instead of falling into orbit, they continued outward. Several collided with the planet's giant moon; a few flew by other planets in the solar system.

She could not fathom the purpose to these ejected bodies with their weak radio signals. Even as she pondered the question, an opportunity presented itself. One of the strange bodies was outbound in a course toward the fourth planet; its trajectory would bring it quite near to her. She shifted her orbit slightly, savoring the faint radio signals emitted by the approaching body. At its closest approach, she swung a manipulator and deflected the body into her accretion disk. There was a satisfying burst of energy as the small mass was destroyed and she fed contentedly. The object had proved to be quite rich, composed of relatively rare heavy elements. Perhaps the third planet was trying to nourish its moon and the other planets in the solar system?

Even as she-who-was-self considered the possibility and found it doubtful, new objects were hurled from the planet's surface. Several of these, too, she fed upon. Others passed beyond the range of her manipulators, steadily transmitting radio signals



back to the parent planet.

There was a brief pause and then yet another new object erupted from the planet's surface. Her analysis of its mass showed it to be much heavier than any previously launched object. She-who-was-self waited expectantly for the newest mystery to approach. She was moving her manipulators into position as it came into range when an astounding event occurred. A miniature sun blossomed where the object had been, releasing an enormous burst of energy.

She-who-was-self was overwhelmed with joy as she gobbled the outpouring of nutrients. There was little doubt, now. The planet had become aware of her and was giving her an offering. The energy dissipated and her black holes were swollen by their sudden intake. She quickly created some new manipulators and balanced the mass/energy of her body parts to maintain stability. And then she continued to listen to the symphony of radio waves coming from the planet's surface.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was only moments later in the life of she-who-was-self when the song of the planet stopped. A sudden burst of gamma rays erupted from the planet's surface, and then another, and then another, until hundreds and then thousands of bursts had taken place. Each gamma event was also marked by a burst of neutrinos. At some points the planet's atmosphere was momentarily blown away by massive shock waves, allowing a great flux of neutrons to escape into space.

She-who-was-self idly absorbed those of the latter that passed near, feeding herself, troubled by the events. For the briefest of instants, miniature suns, like those the planet had fed her, flourished on the planet's surface. Simultaneously, the radio transmissions dropped off, ceasing suddenly or overwhelmed by static.

She watched and waited. The gamma events abated, but chaos permeated the radio frequencies that had been so abundant with order before. For a brief time, the number of signals began to grow again only to dwindle once more and cease completely. The static from the planet's surface now merely echoed the chaos of the heavens.

She circled the planet patiently. Several hundred times the planet completed an orbit around its sun. At last she conceded defeat. The planet sang no more. She waited, accumulating enough wandering meteors to throw against the void and break her orbit. Leaving the solar system would be difficult; she was moving slowly and would need to use the gravity wells of the planets to accelerate, just as she had earlier used them to brake.

As she-who-was-self moved slowly outward, she reviewed her memories, replaying the songs of the planet over and over. The chaos of a million frequencies beat at her, a constant reminder of what-was-no-more. And for some reason that was inexplicable, she mourned the loss. And that, too, was new.

She-who-was-self swims in a sea of sensation, bathed in the light of a million frequencies, weighing

the non-chaos-that-was against the chaos that is. Her reason is dim, yet with half-thought purpose her course takes her in the direction of another small, yellow star.

The yellow star is close as she regards distances. It will not take her more than twice the brief interval she had spent orbiting the singing planet to complete her journey.

Perhaps the new star has a planet waiting with a song of its own. And perhaps it will still be singing when she arrives.

— ABO —

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SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY REVIEW



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# Merchant Dying

(Continued from page 7)

Merchant sees the heavy shadow under Tullock's eyes and realizes that he has sacrificed sleep to be here. He is filled with deep affection for the little man, but the irony of Tullock's last remark has choked him. Tears fill his eyes, but he knows he must not laugh or his head will hurt.

He clears his throat; he thinks. It does not matter whether he goes home today or not. What he wants is some news of the probe. But Tullock, he sees, is hiding something from him. He is speaking in generalities, and the tone of his voice is slightly too high-pitched. Merchant confronts him, accuses him of holding something back. He demands to know what is going on. His arm comes down hard on the bed and he winces.

Tullock's face lengthens, sags. He squints at Merchant. "We lost the signal last night," he says. "Totally."

Merchant sits back. He is not alarmed; he is thinking furiously. He points out to Tullock that this has happened once before. Tullock nods, discussing the situation in some detail.

Sara, worried about Merchant, becomes exasperated. "Can't you just send it a new command?" she asks. "You did that with the Saturn orbiter."

But Tullock explains that it would take over a decade for their signal to reach it. They can only wait as the probe, designed for such emergencies, tries to repair itself.

"We won't know," adds Merchant, "until it's succeeded. Or failed."

She gazes at him. His eyes have brightened. She thinks that it was better after all for him to have learned Tullock's secret.

"Hey, look at me!" says Merchant, touching his bandage. "I'm going home. I cheated death!"

Into the sudden silence he adds, "Gallows humor."

So he goes home. On his back in the ambulance, he sees leaves swaying gently in green sunlight. He sees a deep sky streaked with cirrus.

Although within the week the effects of Merchant's accident have subsided, the injury has seemed to aggravate his condition. Again he is unable to keep food down. His excursions become limited to occasional walks, and soon these are too tiring for him. He becomes an indoor person. The smells of the outside overpower him — grass and earth smells, acrid car exhausts, the ammonia smell of insects.

This is Merchant's schedule as he begins his final summer: awake at 7:00, when the sleeping potion wears off. A large glass of milk and a pain pill after dry cereal for breakfast. A nap from 10:00 to 12:00. Awake at noon for another pain pill. Broth for lunch, dry toast. At 4:00, a pain pill and milk. He calls Tullock, who has left the graveyard shift and now works from noon to 8:00. Dinner is at 6:00, always agonizing as they experiment to see what he can keep

down. At 8:00, a final pain pill, a sleeping pill, and the day ends. Sara now sleeps in the room across the hall, because Merchant thrashes restlessly in a futile attempt to be comfortable.

One day Sara comes into the room during his call to Tullock. She waits quietly as he discusses on-board repair strategies and their chances of success. When he is through, she says, "It's going to come back. I know it."

Merchant wheels on her savagely; his face tightens in fury. "What do you know about it? It's been out there over ninety years! We don't even know what's wrong with it!"

He bangs his fist on the little table and the glass of milk spills on the carpet, becoming a dark and widening pool.

"Damn!" he shouts. "Damn!"

Trying to get up for a towel, he is overcome with dizziness and stumbles. The glass breaks beneath his foot. Its fragments throw sunlight in strange designs on the ceiling, on the wall, on him. He looks up for Sara but she has left the room.

Merchant is afraid. He sits alone in the half-light. Since the death of his father early in his childhood, he has feared hospitals deeply. He hates their metallic cleanliness, the smell of their antiseptics. And with the swollen ego of the dying, he has announced without consulting Sara that he will die at home.

But now he has a revelation. It comes to him somehow in the prismatic glow of the broken glass. He walks carefully into the hall, trailing one hand against the door. His face is flushed with fever. He takes her by the shoulders, then puts his arms around her.

She holds him so hard that he almost cries out. That night she helps him pack his suitcase.

Merchant's hospital room has a big, adjustable bed, a single wooden chair, and a painted bureau. He can move his bed so that he sees the scabrous branches of an oak outside his window. He lies on the bed and feels the late afternoon sun. The soft, mottled light ripples with the motion of the leaves.

He has said from the beginning that he will die quickly if he goes back to the hospital, but in fact he lingers into July. He feels nothing at all save that it is becoming harder and harder to stay awake. Sometimes he is aware of other people in the room with him. A nurse with a familiar, soothing voice pats his arm as she changes his IV. He hears Dr. Fussell's rasping voice, and once Tullock's. And Sara. He feels her presence even as he sleeps.

Merchant has no last words. In the final week of his life, he is slipping so rapidly that he does not speak again. It does not occur to him to try. His subconscious presents him with a parade of images from his life. He thinks that some are inaccurate but cannot say which. He sees a dusty road in Iowa strangled by green. He hears his father's voice.

On the last day, he suddenly snaps to consciousness. He sees Sara sitting next to him; she is holding his hand. He looks into her eyes and sees that she is looking at him from a great distance. Now he knows that this is not their parting. They parted before,

somewhere between the knowing and the doing, between the death and the dying. He does not know when this was, but thinks it must have been on the day of the broken glass, shortly after which he fell silent forever.

Now he falls. The void is warm and comforting, its depths lit by fragments of broken glass that blur into stars. Or maybe they are just the after-images of the room lights, flickering as his neurons discharge.

Merchant is cremated, as he had requested. There is a memorial service, attended by some of Sara's friends, a group of scientists from the project, an official from NASA. A fine drizzle powders the dark umbrellas under which the group walks to its cars. They speak in low voices of Merchant's life, but no one has really known him well.

Sara thanks each of those who have attended the service, then drives back to the house. There is work to be done and it must begin immediately. Death is in the house, in the dust that has accumulated during the past three weeks while she virtually lived at the hospital, in the tumescent air. She must cleanse the Merchant house of death.

She begins her work at once and continues far past midnight. She dusts, she scrubs, ignoring her exhaustion. Her swollen eyes burn as she opens all the windows. Frantically, she seizes Merchant's picture and cleans the dust from it. But in the night death hides in the crevices despite all she does. She stands with the vacuum before the door of Merchant's closet, unable to move. Her hand is on the knob. Death lurks like a seething fume in his clothing.

Sara awakens on the floor next to the vacuum where she has fallen. The room is pale; the sun peers in through morning fog. The next three weeks begin as she stands stiffly, then walks to the sink to throw water in her face. They end with a ringing telephone.

Tullock peers into the circuit. He seems distracted; his eyes dance. He asks her to come to the Control Center. "Please," he says. "We all thought you should be in on this."

"Of course."

She breaks the connection, finds her keys, and backs the Buick out of the driveway. She moves down the same divided highway where Merchant had his accident. Shortly after Merchant's death, the probe switched on again. It is now on the outer edges of the planetary system around Epsilon Indi.

Sara's face is caught by the light of the street lamps as she passes under them. It is a face which age has hardened. The line of her jaw suggests resolve, but the eyes are wounded. The color of those eyes — a flinty blue gray — the way they seem to see through things, renders her more striking than beautiful. She seems to look into a place no one else can see.

She finds Tullock not outside where he had promised to meet her but, through corridors, in the wide control room. He is animated, his face bright red with excitement as he goes from console to console, peering over shoulders, slapping backs. There is a charged buzz of conversation and information, chirping telemetry, ringing telephones. Her eye is caught by the sea-green motion of the seconds changing on the

chronometer: 94:156:04:19:11...12...13...

There is an unfamiliar man at the console which Merchant occupied; Sara sees wavy brown hair, a dangled cigarette. But then Tullock sees her, crosses the floor in great strides, hugs her. The light changes as he does this. The giant screen at the center of the front wall becomes a huge star field, upon which are set in the foreground an incredibly bright star, and one very green disc, just large enough to show a crescent. There is a roar from the room, the wild clapping of hands, and Sara now sees that Tullock has lit a cigar. He hugs her again.

"That's from the main probe," he explains. "Eleven planets — that's the eighth, a gas giant. Probably the only one we'll see tonight."

But she knows all this. Merchant has described it to her often enough. The probe is at fourteen percent of the speed of light as it nears Epsilon Indi. It will cross the system in a matter of days, scattering smaller probes behind. Sara can hear him saying all this by candlelight in a Mexican restaurant a year before they married. She can see him hunched over the terminal, awash in the data stream.

"Eleven planets!" cries Tullock. "Can you believe it?"

But Sara does not seem to hear him. As a great cheer gusts from the crowd, she walks down the center ramp, halfway to the screen. It towers above her, throwing upon her skin the light of Epsilon Indi. All around her men are punching buttons, adjusting dials, talking into microphones. The telemetry from the probe comes on and on, a wave engulfing them all.

Tullock walks to her side; he leans close to her ear. "I wish Lee could have seen this," he says.

She does not respond. She is bathed in hot yellow light. The howling photon stream of Epsilon Indi is breaking against her face as the first of the smaller probes is jettisoned. As it lets go, she feels no longer human. She is the probe, scorching the vast arc of spacetime. She will plunge close enough to this star to feel its fire caress her silver cheek, then out, out, out, to what end she cannot conceive.

— ABO —

## Doing Time

(Continued from page 22)

dolina, Tobert and I reached our Lightsout. Acceleration rammed me into my web as we lifted off, Tobert at the controls.

I made myself comfortable in the webbing as Tobert spoke. "You know — that place reminds me of the old saying about a place so boring you could spend a week there in one afternoon." He hadn't grinned in quite a while. The mood was catching.

"Yeah," I said, grinning right back. "Look at the good side though — we just got almost two years' pay for a month's work."

To this day, when anyone talks about time off for good behavior, I grimace.

— ABO —

# Alien Publisher

(Continued from page 12)

The underclass is beyond control, and the system makes very little effort to involve its members in the social structure. Containment is the main strategy with these people. The members of the working class, on the other hand, are integrated into the system. As property owners, they have nothing to speak of. (This is all relative, by the way. People who own suitcase-sized radios, color televisions, and American automobiles would be considered obscenely wealthy in most other human societies.) Yet the members of the working class have virtually no prospect of legally obtaining any more than they have. Occasionally one of them is elevated to a higher economic plane as a result of winning one of the lotteries the governments hold to make people believe advancement is possible, but more of them get struck by lightning in a year than receive wealth from the lottery.

The drones would be willing, under most circumstances, to break all the rules to get more than they have. And it is only because they don't fully understand how much prosperity there is that they stay fairly docile.

They do not realize, for instance, that their life expectancy is so much lower than that of the people in the middle. They are encouraged to use drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (the last is almost exclusively an addiction of the underclass and the working class) in order to end their lives before they would reach the age of retirement and thus be a burden on society.

They know life is better for the upper class, but everybody knows that. They are able to witness the Carringtons and the Ewings on their televisions, but nobody really expects to live at that level.

But the elements of the good life are available to the middle class, and if the working class

discovered this fact, society would de-stabilize. Greater life expectancy, reduced child mortality, bespoke tailoring, hand-made bicycles, solid gold writing instruments, custom-made shoes, oriental carpets, silk neckties, good food with high nutritional value, or any kind of first-class service — these are things the working class knows nothing of. The Carringtons and the Ewings are careful never to talk about them, and the advertisements the drones see on television merely encourage them to shop more at K-Mart and to eat convenience foods.

If you want to know about the good life, you have to read — magazines mostly, but really almost anything else. Members of the middle class read incessantly, chiefly magazines with glossy advertisements, in order to organize and keep track of their aspirations. The working class stiff is not encouraged to read. Those who somehow show a predilection to reading are diverted into tabloid newspapers devoted to stories about flying saucer sightings, freaks, virgin births, and astrology. These tabloid newspapers contain no information about the good life, either.

In fact, the system is self-sustaining. The members of the working class are, by and large, never taught to read. They are processed through an institution called public education that is designed to keep them from reading. They become members of a subgroup known as "functional illiterates."

This is all conjecture, but I spent several days validating it in the education library. The exact mechanism by which people are kept from reading is called education theory.

Human education theory is a hodge-podge of superstition, pop psychology, and badly designed experimentation. It is presented to the people who would study it in mock-scientific language intended to enhance the credibility of its practitioners. Most writing in the education field is designed to

disguise rather than inform, which is understandable because, when you look into it deeply, you see that nothing is there. Most human educators seem never to have discovered the fundamentals of our education theory, things like the principle of the communication of excitement or the primary curiosity factor.

This education theory, then, is used to figuratively lobotomize the people who are engaged to be teachers of the young. By the time these teachers are put into a classroom, any shred of intellectual curiosity, rigorous thinking, or knowledge hunger has been driven out of them. As the primary purveyors of the ability to read, they effectively prevent the transmission of this skill to a major portion of the young. It is a testimony to human curiosity and intellect that so many of the children learn to read after all. Those who don't will then assume positions in the working class, denied any knowledge of the good life and content to perform most of society's work without excessive compensation.

The intellectual disenfranchisement of the American working class is one of humanity's more impressive achievements. Rarely have any living beings been so systematically lobotomized in such a humane fashion. They never rise up and demand the good life because they think they have it. They assume prosperity consists of rather short, unhealthy life surrounded by cheaply made merchandise and barely sustained by overly salted food out of Styrofoam containers. A self-sustaining miracle.

— ABO —

## Editor's Note

Oops. Somehow or other, in part the result of a last minute ad, it seems there isn't enough room for my usual column in this issue. Let me just note that we are very pleased at the result of our first renewal mailing and would like to thank all those who responded promptly. For those who still plan to respond, the one-time-only renewal rate will expire on Aug. 1, 1987. After that prices go up. — Charles C. Ryan

# Borboleta

(Continued from page 11)

"Is. Enough!"

\*\*\* \*\*

From the journal of Prudente Jose Belchior:

The worst thing possible has happened. The alien woman is dead, murdered by one of her guards, a Marine named Aranha, and we do not even know why he did it.

Cronho's security squad found them both naked in her quarters with no signs of violence save the broken neck that killed her. Bio reports she was unquestionably mammalian, and a second guard, a mate of Aranha's called Hermes Braz, claims Aranha was weeping uncontrollably and kept sobbing the phrase, "She laughed at me," over and over again. Cronho confirms this.

What is to be done? What do we tell the aliens? What can we tell them?

What happens to Maria Bethania now?

And what in the name of the Six Virgins made Aranha kill the hostage?

I pray he won't stay catatonic long.

\*\*\* \*\*

"The death of your woman," Belchior said, measuring his words, "was unforeseen, unexpected and undesired. The man who killed her was — to all appearances — completely sane, with a spotless Service record. We tried to take every precaution to insure her safety and well-being. We failed. It is a tragedy, but it was not a deliberate act. But if you kill this woman in reprisal, that will be a calculated, cold-blooded act of savagery — an action we could interpret only as ruthless and despicable."

Keenyon broke in with a burst of angry hisses and gnashings. Okendo listened impassively, his marble gaze on Belchior. The Sangaree air recyclers hummed steadily, though one hiccupped almost imperceptibly at irregular intervals.

Maria Bethania watched Keenyon fixedly. The fear in her eyes, masked from anyone who did not know her as well as Belchior, told the older scientist that during her stay aboard the *Ffa'azza Ffa'yasha* she had come to understand the aliens' speech much better than had any of the Terrans in the contact group.

Suddenly, Okendo hissed a phrase which silenced Keenyon, but left him quivering with rage.

"Young one. Angry," Okendo said, squeezing Keenyon's shoulder. He slapped his own chest. "Understand very good. Angry, too." He popped something into his mouth which crunched like bone between his teeth. "But. No more young. Learn control."

He clamped firm fingers around Belchior's upper arm, bared his teeth in what was not a smile.

"Sangaree. Live a code. Ancient. Strict. Must have. Reparation. Your woman. Die, too."

Pessoa started to protest, but Belchior's suddenly raised hand silenced him. The Brazilian chief scien-

tist's face assumed the impassiveness of an Afran ceremonial mask. He knew now what he had to do.

"Kill her, then," he said.

The Terrans gasped. Okendo and Keenyon exchanged glances. Only Maria Bethania's expression stayed constant. She did not know what Belchior's game might be, but she trusted him wholly.

\*\*\* \*\*

From the journal of Prudente Jose Belchior:

Tonight, a conversation Maria Bethania and I had many years ago echoes in my memory. She was perhaps 6 years old; I, 30. It was mid-December and, just as in the previous year, I had been invited to celebrate the summer solstice with her family at their beachhouse, Villa Coelho, near Iguape, and she had begged me to read her a story.

The story itself I cannot remember, but her words after hearing it have stayed with me, clear as the mountain pools of Sao Sebastiao, these many years.

"I wish we did not have to die," she said.

How surprised I was. Why had such a thought entered her young mind? Nothing in the story could have suggested it.

"That would be a good thing," I said.

She looked away and was silent.

I ran my fingertip over the tooled leather spine of her storybook. She toyed thoughtfully with the black braids of her yarn doll, Marinha. Outside, the waves rolled endlessly onto the rainswept beach.

After a quiet time, she looked up at me with her sweet, sad child's face and gave me a shy little smile.

"I do not want you to die, ever," she said.

Then she burst into tears and ran from the room.

\*\*\* \*\*

"Kill her," Belchior said. "She will die soon anyway. She suffers from a disease we call *trastorno*."

He glanced from Okendo to Keenyon, saw what he thought was disbelief.

"She looks in perfect health. Her eyes are clear and alert. She exudes energy and enthusiasm. Envious traits, no?"

Okendo licked his razor lips.

"But a combination of certain rare amino acids and an unnaturally high concentration of iodine and phosphorus in her bloodstream indicate the advanced state of a disease as yet barely understood, still rarely detected until its final, fulminating stages, and never successfully treated. *Trastorno*."

Maria Bethania's expression had altered subtly. She did not want to believe her lover's chilling words. But he barely glanced her way, and his eyes were icy, as though he cared not a whit for her. She told herself, *This is only a charade to mislead the Others*, but now a dank stone sat in her belly.

Belchior surprised himself with the composure in his voice as he said, "In a few more weeks, she will lose her mental acuity and physical exuberance. Soon after, she will lose even the capacity to think coherently. Her ego will survive for a time, aware of the



Art By Bob Eggleton



outrage being done to it, but helpless to halt or delay it."

Belchior sighed heavily. His was the dispassionate delivery of a lecturer giving the same chat for the thousandth time.

"In the end, she will be isolated, an intelligence sealed inside a brain that no longer functions. She will lose control of the voluntary muscles of her body. Then the involuntary, too, will fail, and she will die."

Belchior gazed frostily into Okendo's fathomless red eyes. "Killing her would be an act of mercy," he spat. "Do what you will." It was plain he cared nothing one way or the other.

Okendo looked thoughtful; Maria Bethania, lost. Okendo took Keenyon aside and the two communicated urgently in a sign language the Terrans had not seen before. When they concluded, the younger Sangaree seemed appeased. Belchior wondered whether that boded good or ill for Maria Bethania.

"Code. Serves Sangaree well. For many Queens," Okendo said to Belchior. "But now you come. From behind stars. Your code. Not. Sangaree code. We. Must learn."

Belchior nodded.

"You. Learn too. Learn Sangaree code." Okendo's eyes grew baleful. His throat whirled. "Learn." He turned his back. "Take woman."

So unexpected were the alien's final words that for a moment none of the Terrans reacted. Keenyon looked betrayed and ready to explode, but a hiss from Okendo defused him. Okendo took Maria Bethania by the arm and gently dispatched her in Belchior's direction.

"Take woman," he said again.

Maria Bethania looked at Belchior searchingly. He let his eyes tell her what she wanted to believe. But even as he saw gratitude and relief flush the fear from her face, an inner voice cried accusingly, *Liar!*

"Take woman. And go," Okendo said in a suddenly strangled voice. "Must. Mourn. Chankla."

The sight of Maria Bethania's now tear-streaked face filled Belchior with anguish. He had saved her, yes, but at what price?

His dispassion had been no act, his lack of feeling no sham. He had stopped caring, had convinced himself that her loss in *no way mattered*. He had tried to strangle all feeling for her, and succeeded. Utterly.

He would love her again, now the thing was over, yes. But it would be a love tainted by betrayal. He had learned he was capable of *not* loving her, could will himself to care nothing for her. That bitter self-knowledge would haunt him always now, as would the ache of something fine in him irrevocably diminished.

Tears welled up. He felt sorely vulnerable and afraid. Then, his eyes met the alien's flat stare and, without conscious thought, his features slipped back into the impassivity of the Afran mask.

"I am sorry," Belchior said. "We are all so very sorry."

Okendo nodded jerkily. His red eyes slitted. His face grew as unreadable as Belchior's, but something in the alien's tone told the Brazilian that the matter

would not end here.

"You have good. Reason," Okendo said.

Belchior had no stomach for threats. He wanted only to be back in his quarters aboard the *Pao de Acucar*, where no one could hurt him and he could hold Maria Bethania forever and never again let her go.

"You are a magnanimous people," he said.

Inside his head, the melody of "*Borboleta*" danced and died, danced and died.

— ABO —

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# Books Received

Because of limited space and time, it is impossible to review all of the books received here at the editorial offices of *Aboriginal SF*. Yet we know many of you, for a variety of reasons, would be interested in reading the books if you knew they were

available. So, as an occasional service, we will publish a list of the books sent us by publishers. You can order the books listed below through your local bookstore. This listing is not intended as a review, nor does a mention in the listing

mean the book will or won't be reviewed by Darrell Schweitzer, our regular reviewer.

Quite a few books have accumulated since we began publishing *Aboriginal SF*. It should be noted that we are listing only those books we

received. Others may have been published, but the publisher neglected to send us a copy. To keep things simple we will list the books by publisher, but the individual titles are not in any particular order.

Here goes:

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### ACE/PUTNAM

#### *Out of Phase*

By Piers Anthony  
1987 288 pages \$17.95

#### *Dayworld Rebel*

By Philip Jose Farmer  
1987 317 pages \$17.95

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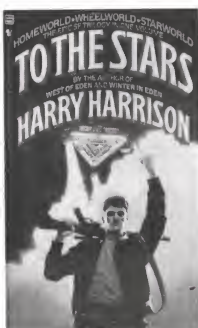
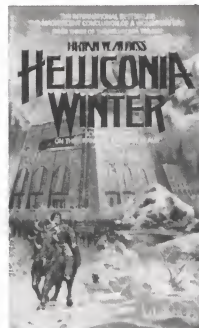
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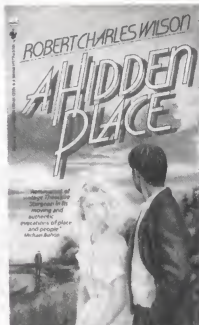
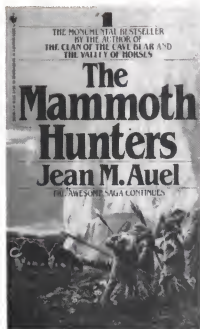
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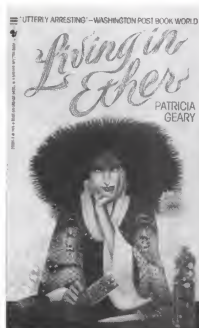
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Art by Tim Sale  
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(Continued to next page)



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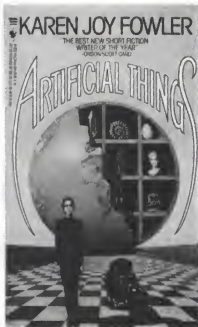
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— ABO —

## Boomerangs

(Continued from page 39)

First off, I'd like to compliment you on your new size ... er, I mean your *issue's* new size. I thought I'd be disappointed with a smaller issue, but let's face it — it's easier to hold.

On a negative note — my copy was very late. After reading your editorial I can see why, but you'll be happy to know the mailman is recovering nicely and holds no grudges against me.

Since I see your face at the head of your column in each issue, I figured it's only fair I sent a photo of me. Not exactly the size to re-cover your dart board, but not bad for target practice when you're in a bad mood.

Now, as regards your request for a wider distribution ... I belong to an international organization called "Starfleet." We are a fan organization of *Star*

*Trek*. Many of our members also like science fiction in general, and I know they'd enjoy *Aboriginal*. (Of course they would! — Ed.)

I'd like your permission to reprint parts of your various issues to send to my friends as an "encouragement" to subscribe. What do you think, Charlie? I suppose legally speaking, I'd need your written permission. I've never done this sort of thing before, so I'd need some expert guidance (hint, hint).

(While we would like to encourage everyone on the planet to read ABO, I'm afraid the copyright laws would prohibit reprinting stories, articles or art from the magazine. The writers, artists and cartoonists earn their living from sales of their work — actually, so does the magazine. Sorry, we'll do what we can to help. And we thank you for the offer. — Ed.)

I really think you have an excellent publication and I can see how beginning writers like myself would feel encouraged to send things. I've already "gotten my feet wet" and been published in several of our newsletters. But, of course, that's a little puzzle, and publications like *Asimov's* are an ocean by comparison.

*Aboriginal* fills a gap by offering a medium-size environment where newer writers feel safe to try their wings (or since we're talking puddles and oceans, maybe I should say "fins"). (Actually, though admittedly biased, we think we're just as good as *Asimov's* — maybe even better. — Ed.)

I say "Bravo, Charlie Ryan!" and thanks for a "leg up" into the literary world.

As always,  
Lillian McManus  
Westwood, NJ

— ABO —

## The Darkfishers

(Continued from page 29)

a shrill scream of sound.

He reached the edge of the darkfish, but even as he did he knew he wouldn't make it. The world was drawing away from the darkfish faster now. Ten feet of dark ocean separated them, twelve —

He leaped. He hung in the air for what seemed an eternity, water chopping below.

Then he hit the ocean and slid into it open-mouthed, came up sputtering, thrashing arms and legs. It was cold, so cold. He glimpsed the world only a few feet before him. Something hard hit him in the shoulder, almost forcing him under water, and he glimpsed a pale object in front of him. Instinctively he grabbed for it.

His hands tightened, fingers aching, palms aching. He felt himself being pulled through the water. In a second, rough hands seized him, hauling him up onto the edge of the world, onto dry plates. He suddenly became aware of what he was holding — his uncle's spear. Felran had held it out to him. Now his uncle had to pry it out of his grasp.

"That was a damn stupid thing to do," Felran said, as he hugged his nephew.

Rel shivered from cold. "Sith—"

Felran shook his head. "Look," he whispered softly.

Rel stood. The darkfish was fast vanishing in the distance, but on its edgeplates he thought he saw a solitary figure. He watched as long as he could, a lump in his throat, his heart beating all too loudly. And then

Sith and the darkfish were gone. The ocean stretched to infinity before him.

*Drifting...*

He tried to speak, but couldn't. He didn't know what to say. All the men had come down from Home and picked up the various sacks and bladders. Their voices were flat, muted. It always hurt to lose someone to the ocean, to the darkfish.

"Come, Rel," Felran said, but Rel wouldn't go. He just sat there and stared out across the water, across the waves that rippled with the silver light of moons and stars. After a moment, his uncle left him there alone.

*Drifting...*

When he'd lost his father, he hadn't truly known the loss, known the hurt, but he felt it now like an old wound reopened. How could such things happen? It didn't seem fair. The darkfish had taken what he'd loved and what he'd hated most in all the universe. To the ocean it was just another man swallowed.

*Drifting...*

Such power terrified him. The ocean was stronger than him, stronger than the worldmaster, stronger than any man. It was a harsh truth that he saw all too clearly now.

*Drifting...*

After a time, he crept away to the warm, close safety of Home. From there the water couldn't be seen. He swore he'd never go back, never darkfish again, but even as he did he knew he lied. He remembered the thrill of standing on strange plates, of working with his uncle, of being a man among men. The ocean, the darkfish, were revealed to him now. And never would they fool him again.

— ABO —

# It Came from the Slushpile

By Bruce Bethke

Art by Larry Blamire

The place stank. A queer, mingled stench that only the manuscript-buried offices of fiction magazines know. Groping for the light switch, Rex Manly, the two-fisted editor of *Stupefying Stories Magazine*, led two junior college interns into the cramped and windowless back office.

"This is the slush pile," Rex said in his deep, mature voice. "Normally we try to stay on top of it, but our associate editor quit six months ago and we couldn't afford to replace her. So we've let it get a little out of hand." Rex found the light switch; after a few crackles from a dying transformer, flickery blue fluorescent light flooded the room. Sheila, the tall, willowy, blonde intern, gasped; Janine, the other intern, bit her lip and fought back the tears.

"There are some six thousand unsolicited manuscripts here," Rex continued. "Of those, six hundred are worth reading, and one hundred worth publishing. At best, twelve suit our current needs and budget well enough to be purchased.

"Your job," Rex said, as he laid his massive hand on the manila-colored heap, "is to sift through this and find the dozen gems that *might* be hiding here." Suddenly, the stack of manuscripts shifted and began collapsing around him like an erasable bond avalanche. With an agility uncommon in a man his size, Rex leapt clear. "You get half an hour for lunch," he said calmly, as if nothing had happened. "We see there isn't a clock in here, so we'll send someone by at noon to check up on you. Coffee's in the art department; if you didn't brown-bag there's a Burger King up the street." The two women were still overawed by the Herculean — or rather, Augean — task they faced, and asked no questions. Rex closed the door as he left.

\*\*\*

"Ready for lunch yet?" the shapely brunette asked as she arched her back against the doorframe, and with studied carelessness caught a polished fingernail on the hem of her skirt, tugging it up to expose a flash of silk-stockinged thigh.

"In a minute, Gina," Rex said to the Art Director, without looking up. "We've got a really tough comma fault here we're trying to nail down." Gina pouted and sighed heavily, reminding Rex that it was dangerous to leave her with idle time on her hands. "Tell you what," Rex said. "Do us a favor and tell those two interns working the slush pile that it's time for lunch, okay?" Without answering, the Art Director turned and sauntered down the hall, her high heels clicking out a seductive Morse code on the terrazzo floor.

This was followed, in short order, by a piercing scream.

Rex vaulted over his desk and ran out into the hall, to find Gina wailing hysterically. Mascara streamed down her cheeks like oil from a leaky rocker arm cover. "What happened?" he demanded as he grabbed her roughly.

"You're hurting me roughly!" she cried. Rex relaxed his grip; Gina sobbed, buried her face in his broad chest, and said, "It's awful! Terrible! Hideous! Grue —!"

He slapped her. "Excess adjectives!"

Gina shuddered, then regained her composure. "Sheila and Janine, they're ... oh, it's too horrible!" A small crowd was gathering around the door of the interns' office, so Rex helped Gina into a chair and bulldozed his way through the staffers.

"Does anyone here know — ?" He stopped, the question caught in his throat. Sheila and Janine lay on the floor, two crushed, ink-smudged corpses half-covered in manuscripts.

"The slush pile must have imploded," said Phil Jennings, the Science Fact Editor, who'd slipped through the crowd to stand at Rex's right elbow. "No one's ever researched the critical mass of unpublished manuscripts. They may undergo gravitational collapse like a black hole."

Rex crouched; Phil crouched with him. "But the ink stains," Rex said softly.

Phil gingerly reached out and touched Janine's





face. "Still fresh," he said.

"Then at least we're getting through about using new typewriter ribbons." Rex stood, resolve giving strength to his voice. "Okay, let's get them out of there. Jerry, Dave," he pointed to two of the keyliners, "get in there and get their feet. Phil, take Sheila; we'll take Janine." Cautiously, the keyliners waded into the office, but before they'd gotten more than ankle deep they both slipped and fell on the erasable bond. "Are you okay?" Rex called out.

"Think so," answered Jerry, who was closest to the center of the heap, "but there's something funny going on here. My foot's caught on something."

"Oh my God," Dave gasped.

Behind Jerry, a large, white- and black-speckled pseudopod was slowly extruding from the slush pile. "Phil?" Rex asked calmly, his voice belying the cold horror he felt. "What do you make of that?"

Phil leaned forward, squinted, took off his glasses and cleaned them on the tail of his shirt, put them back on, and then squinted again. "Hard to tell from this distance," he said softly, "but it looks like a plagiarization of an old *Twilight Zone* script."

"What are you ... ?" Jerry rolled around and caught a glimpse of the thing slithering up behind him. His scream catalyzed the rest into action.

"Give me your hand!" Rex bellowed as he leapt into the room. In moments he'd wrenched Dave free and pushed him out the door, but by then the pseudopod had Jerry and was drawing him deeper into the pile. "Someone find a rope!" Rex shouted. Fighting for balance, he waded in deeper. Jerry clawed for him like a drowning man; their fingers touched briefly, and then Rex lost his footing and went down.

"Hold on, Rex!" Phil shouted. He pulled out his butane lighter, set it to *High*, and charged in, wielding the lighter like a flaming sword. With four wild slashes, he freed Rex.

"Now for Jerry!" Rex bellowed.

"It's too late!" Phil screamed. Rex plowed back into the manuscripts, while Phil tried to stave off the advancing pseudopodia, but a sixty-page rewrite of Genesis 5:1-24 rose up and slapped the lighter out of Phil's hand. Then the slush pile began building into a great wave that towered over them. "Rex! Get out!" Phil yelled as he dove headfirst through the doorway. Reluctantly, Rex followed. "Shut it!" Phil shouted. Most of the staffers had already run away, and those that remained were paralyzed with fear, but one of the free lance book reviewers had something of his wits left about him and he pulled the door shut, just as the heap smashed against it with a great soggy *thump*.

Rex sagged against the wall. "Jerry," he said softly. "Oh Jerry, we're sorry."

Dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex, Gina gave Rex a consoling hug. "There's nothing you could have done," she said.

Resolve flooded back into Rex, and he began issuing commands. "You there," he barked, pointing at the surviving production crew, "find something to barricade this doorway."

"Phil!" he snapped. "What *is* that thing?"

Phil took off his glasses, chewed the earpiece for a bit, then shrugged and said, "Beats the hell out of me."

"We pay you two hundred dollars a month for Science Facts," Rex growled, "and all you can say is —"

"Hey, I only *minored* in Biology!" Phil said defensively. "I majored in Philosophy. You want a philosopher's guess about it?" Rex said nothing, so Phil continued. "Okay, here's the hard-science guess: It's a cellulose lifeform that mimics manuscripts for protective coloration. Maybe it's symbiotic with the scuzzy blue mold that grows in old coffee cups. Kathryn was always leaving half-empty cups in there."

Rex shook his head. "Too 1940-ish. Old hat."

"Okay," Phil said, "here's the philosophical guess. It's divine retribution for letting manuscripts sit for six months."

"We *never* buy theological fantasy." Rex thought a moment more, then reached a decision. "It doesn't matter where it came from. The question is, what do we do about it?"

"Get more lighters," the book reviewer said. "Torch the sucker."

"We'd rather not," Rex said. "The building's a firetrap."

"Let's lure it into the paper cutter," Gina suggested. "Dure it a Conan on it. Fight hacks with hacks, I say."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Phil answered. "It's extremely amorphous. It may even be a colony organism. Cut it in half and we may well end up with two monsters."

"Do you have a better idea?" Rex asked.

"I think we should attack its component parts," Phil said. "If we can disperse them, we might destroy its will to exist."

"Huh?" said Gina.

"We must *reject* it," Phil said portentously. "Reject every last piece of it."

"I know where there are some rejection slips!" the book reviewer shouted. He dashed over to the managing editor's office, and in moments returned bearing two fistfuls of paper.

Rex took one, and pushed the other into Phil's hands. "If it gets past me ...," Rex began. Phil nodded.

"Oh, be careful!" Gina sobbed as she hugged Rex. "Easy, kid," he said coolly. "You're getting mascara on my shirt." Then he looked to Phil. "Ready?" Phil nodded.

Luckily, the staffers Rex had sent running to find barricade materials had simply kept running, so all he had to do was kick open the door, step into the breach, and start passing out the slips. In seconds, though, it became obvious that something was terribly wrong. Instead of being driven back, the thing was surging forward, swelling, *growing*; it even formed a pseudohead and started catching the slips on the fly, like a spaniel jumping for Doggie Snax. "What the

hell?" Phil wondered aloud. Then he looked at the slips he held:

### *Stupefying Stories*

Dear Writer,

Thanks for showing us the enclosed manuscript. We've read it and are sorry to say we do not think it's quite right for *Stupefying* at this time. Please don't regard this as a reflection on the quality of your work; we receive a great many publishable stories but simply don't have the space to print every one we like.

Because of the great number of submissions we receive, we cannot make more specific comments. But again, thanks for giving us the opportunity to consider it, and we hope you find a market for it elsewhere.

Cordially,  
Rex Manly, Editor

"Get out of there!" Phil screamed. "You're *encouraging* it!" Rex hastily backed out of the room; the thing followed him, swirling about his feet and emitting happy yipping sounds. They barely got the door shut in time; when it realized that Rex had gotten away it began furiously hurling itself at the door, and it took both Rex and Phil to hold the door closed.

"What went wrong?" Rex demanded. "Analysis, Mr. Jennings!"

"We need something colder and blunter," Phil answered. "We need to stun it, depress it, crush its ego." The thing built up into another great wave and crashed against the door; this time the book reviewer had to throw his shoulder into it, too. "And soon!" Phil shouted.

"The previous editor used slips like that," Rex said. "Can you hold the door while we look for some?" Not waiting for an answer, Rex sprinted back to his office and began rummaging around in the filing cabinets.

"I *hate* working on spec," the book reviewer growled.

In a few minutes, Rex returned. "These are all we could find," he said. "Will they do?" Phil took one and read:

### *STUPEFYING Stories and Science*

Dear Contributor,

We regret that we are unable to use the enclosed material. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to consider it.

The Editors

"It might," Phil said, "it just might."

With Gina's help, Rex laid out a semi-circle of rejection slips in front of the door. When the last one was in place, he yelled, "Now!", and Phil and the book reviewer leapt clear. The door burst open with a violence that nearly tore it from its hinges, and the disgusting, pulsating mass slithered forward, found the first rejection slip, paused ...

"It's working!" Phil crowed.

The slush pile shuddered, drew back slightly, and began whimpering. This quickly built into a spastic quivering, and the pile began sloughing off return envelopes and loose stamps.

"Is it dying?" Gina asked.

Phil wiped the perspiration from his glasses, peered closely at the trembling hulk, and said, "I'm not sure."

"I'll show you how to make sure!" the book reviewer shouted as he ran up the hall. "We give it the *coup de grace*!" He found a typewriter, cranked in a sheet of letterhead, and began frantically clacking away.

"What are you doing?" Gina asked.

"What I do best," he said with a wicked grin. "Crushing an ego." He finished the letter, yanked it out of the typewriter, and ran back to show it to the others. "One look at this, and it will shrivel up and die!"

"A bit strong, don't you think?" Rex observed.

It read:

Dear Talentless Hack,

Were you by chance going to the town landfill on the same day that you mailed your manuscript? We ask because it appears that you have gotten confused, discarded your story, and mailed your garbage instead.

"In the future you may save yourself postage by simply not submitting to us at all. We will be watching for your name; rest assured that we will never forgive you for attempting to foist this load of pathetic crapola off on us.

With malice aforethought,  
The Editors

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea," Phil said.

"Nonsense," the book reviewer countered. "I've done this a thousand times. Just watch." He slipped the letter under the nearest edge of the slush pile; within seconds the thing was smoking, shaking, and letting out hideous groans. "You see?" the book reviewer said smugly — and in less time than it takes to describe it, the slush pile rose up, quivering and roaring, and squashed him flatter than a thin-crust pizza.

"Good God!" Rex yelled. "That only enraged it! *Run!*" he shouted, as if Gina and Phil needed instructions.

The thing surged down the hallway after them,

bellowing angrily and engulfing chairs, desks, ashtrays — anything that stood in its way. There was no plan to their flight, only sheer adrenalin panic, and so they wound up dashing into the Art Department two steps ahead of the thing. Phil slammed the door in its pseudoface; sinews straining, Rex held the door shut while Phil tipped over a few filing cabinets and pushed them together to form a barricade.

Frustrated, the pile drew back and then threw itself against the door with all its force. Miraculously, the filing cabinets held. "Well, we're safe for the moment," Phil said between gasps. "It can't get in."

"Just one problem," Rex noted. "We can't get out either." The three of them looked around. There was indeed no other way out: no window, no door, no conveniently large air duct...

"We're trapped!" Gina wailed.

"Get a grip on yourself!" Rex shrieked. "This is no time for hysteria!"

"I'm trapped in a dead end by a monster that wants me for lunch!" Gina sobbed. "Can you think of a better time?"

"She's right, Rex," Phil said softly. "Sooner or later that monster will realize that it can ooze around the barricade. We're done for." He took off his glasses and slowly, mournfully, cleaned them on his shirt tail one last time.

"NEVER!" Rex bellowed, finding his full imperative strength at last. "We do not buy stories that end in futility!"

"Look at us!" he commanded, as he stalked about the room gesturing wildly. "What are we? Three people trapped in a blind alley by an unstoppable monster? No! We are three *archetypes*! The brilliant, scientific, nearly omniscient mind! The curvaceous, screamy, eminently rescuable heroine! The aggressive, dynamic, mightily-thewed hero! We have an *obligation* to beat that thing!"

"You! Phil!" he ordered. "Go *discover* something! Me! I!" Rex paused, stunned with the realization that he'd dropped his editorial plural. "I'll think of an ingenious plan to take advantage of whatever you discover. And Gina? You —," Rex sat down, and grumpily put his chin in his palm. "Aw hell, go make some coffee or something."

As the weight of his new responsibility settled onto Phil, he sat up alertly and said, "Listen! It's stopped!" Rex's ears perked up; the thing had indeed stopped hammering at the barricade. Phil crept to the door and peered out. Rex followed, and saw the quiescent beast lying in the hall.

"Is it dead?" Rex asked hopefully.

"Do archetypological monsters ever die?" Phil answered scornfully. "It's dormant, of course."

"So now would be the perfect time to strike?"

"If we had a weapon," Phil agreed.

"We're out of coffee," Gina said, "will tea do?" She held up a Salada tea bag.

Rex snatched the bag out of her hand. "Of course!" he cried, the light of inspiration burning fiercely in his eyes.

"Didn't know you liked tea so much," Gina mut-

tered.

"Don't you see?" he shouted, holding up the tiny paper tag on the end of the string. "Gina, honey, can you reduce our logo and make it fit on this?"

"Well," she said dubiously, "normally it'd take a week to keyline and shoot the stats, but I think —"

"Don't think! Do!" He spun around. "Phil! Help me with our paper stock. I want something truly obnoxious. Fluorescent Yellow will do, Blaze Orange would be better! And find some glue sticks!" Rex started dumping boxes on the floor and searching through the resulting heap.

"What — ?" Phil started to ask.

"We," Rex said proudly, "are going to create the *ultimate* rejection slip. One that crushes all hope, destroys all incentive, leaves no room for argument or interpretation —"

"Well, we'd better hurry," Phil said ominously. "I don't know what it's doing out there, but I'm sure I won't like it when I find out."

\*\*\*\*\*

An hour later they were nearly ready. They'd had to modify the design slightly as they went along to suit the materials at hand, but the result —



— on a postage stamp-sized slip of Neon Lime Green stock, was coming off the copier. "Remember," Rex was saying, "we hit it hard, we hit it fast, we take no prisoners —"

"And we hit it *soon*," Phil added as he peered out the door. "I've figured out what it's doing. It's metastasizing."

Rex stopped short. "What?"

"Look at it," Phil said. "Those lumps all over its back; they're buds. It's getting ready to reproduce."

"Good grief," Rex gasped, "you mean we'll have more of those things?"

"Worse," Phil said pensively. "If I'm right, in its larval stage it takes the form of an unsolicited manuscript. In a few minutes this place is going to be crawling with stories: thousands, maybe *tens* of thousands, of stories. Stories about flying saucers, deals with the devil, time travelers killing their grandparents," the panic began rising in Phil's voice, "evil galactic empires, Celtic witches, sentient dragons, killer robots disguised as toasters." Phil was bordering on total hysteria now. "Rewrites of the Old Testament! *Star Trek* ripoffs! 21st Century Barbarians!"

"Rex!" Phil screamed. "There are enough nuclear holocaust stories in there to wipe out this entire solar system!"

"Gina!" Rex barked. "Hurry up with those slips!"

"Be patient!" she snapped. "You can't rush qual-





ity work!"

"Omigod," Phil gasped, his face ashen, "they're hatching."

"Gina!" Rex demanded. "I need those slips now!"

"Hold your horses. They're just about ready ..."

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Even with ten years' experience in hand-to-hand fiction editing, the fifteen minutes that followed were the most ghastly Rex had ever lived through. Armed with the new rejection slips, he, Gina, and Phil waded into the heart of the beast, tearing open envelopes and slapping down tags. *Gluing* them to the manuscripts, to force retyping; in an odd way the process had a familiar feel, as if they were driving thousands of little stakes through thousands of tiny vampires' hearts.

It was a grisly job, but at last they were done. "It's harmless," Phil pronounced. "We destroyed its will to live."

Rex brushed aside a pile of spent glue sticks and collapsed into a chair. "Did we get it all? All?"

"Here's one we missed!" Gina called out, as she crouched on her hands and knees and peered under the receptionist's desk. She fished out the manuscript and read aloud, "It Came from the Slushpile, by some guy I've never heard of."

"Ugh!" Phil spat. "Sounds like a bad '50s sci-fi movie!"

"I don't know," Gina countered. "Listen to this: 'The place stank. A queer, mingled stench that only the —'"

"That's the opening of John Campbell's *Who Goes There?*," Rex said wearily. "At least he plagiarizes from a good source."

"So you don't want to read it?" Gina asked. Rex answered her with a sneer more eloquent than any words.

"Okay," Gina shrugged, as she dabbed some glue on a rejection slip and prepared to slap it down.

But then, she hesitated ...

— ABO —

## Books

(Continued from page 15)

book for it to work through the usual channels.

But there's more to the answer than that. If the book is *good*, as this one is, if it can move readers on the basis of what it is, not what it is expected to be, it's got a chance.

*The Eyes of the Dragon* (a reprint of the 1986 Philtrum Press limited edition now worth about \$800) was written to reach one of King's daughters, who does not share Daddy's taste for horror. She's in it by name, as are some of her siblings and friends. For many writers, the result would be surely just self-indulgence, of little interest beyond the family. But, I hasten to point out, a very great book, *Alice in Wonderland*, was written to amuse a specific child.

King gave it his best, and the result is a medieval-world fantasy rather like the "Territories" sequences of *The Talisman*, but with the moral intensity of a fairy tale. There are lots of good touches and good characterizations. His detractors to the contrary, King is clearly able to write a story without piling on modern brand names. He knows the way to the human heart. Once a writer knows that, all else is window dressing.

On the minus side, he sometimes lapses into bad attempts at "high" style (grammarians and Scrabble players may raise a few eyebrows when King Roland is stunned to utter "movelessness"



on page 6) and needless vulgarity (this may have the most extensive descriptions of nose-picking in all literature), but the story is strong and fast-moving, and ends just right, and once in a

while King delivers one of his perfect, and perfectly chilling, phrases, as when (p. 129), "Fear opened in his heart like a small and delicate rose."

Rating: ★★☆☆

### *The Compleat Crow*

By Brian Lumley

Canby, 1987, 191 pp.

Deluxe, signed hardcover: \$35.00

Regular hardcover: \$21.00

Trade paperback: \$7.50

Brian Lumley has a reputation for being a Lovecraft imitator, which isn't really fair. If you actually *read* his stories, you'll see that while they incorporate a lot of Lovecraftian lore, they are by no means Lovecraftian in form or execution. Lumley follows Lovecraft the way Arthurian writers follow those who have gone before. It's the same material, but he does what he wants with it.

The Titus Crow series is a worthy successor to the psychic adventures of John Silence, Jules de Grandin, and other occult investigators of yore. Crow is a virtuous savant more than a little versed in the Eldritch Horrors and what to do about them. Unlike most Cthulhu Mythos protagonists, who seem to exist sole-

ly to be eaten, he shows refreshing spunk. Few of these stories will actually scare, but they're great fun. And the deluxe edition is of extremely high quality, illustrated by Stephen Fabian, who is experimenting with scratchboard and producing work as impressive as what he's done before, but quite different.

Rating: ☆☆☆

#### *Takeoff Too!*

By Randall Garrett  
Donning, 311 pp. \$7.95

A handsome trade paperback, illustrated by Phil Foglio, a successor to the popular *Takeoff!*, consisting of stories, articles, songs, parodies, etc. by Randall Garrett, who, alas, is suffering from a disability and may never write again. Books like this make us appreciate how enjoyable a writer he was, not deep, but witty, halfway between class clown and court jester.

Rating: ☆☆☆

#### *Robert E. Howard*

By Marc A. Cerasini and Charles Hoffman  
Starmont Reader's Guide No. 35  
1987, 156 pp., \$17.95 (hard), \$9.95 (paper)

These two critics, who are surprisingly defensive about their subject-author, are probably waiting for me to take a swipe at them because they call my *Conan's World* and *Robert E. Howard* "the nadir of Howard criticism." No, guys — I freely admit I wrote that book hastily and at the publisher's behest and that it isn't very good. Yours is vastly more detailed, and may well be the best critical survey of the bulk of Howard's fiction we'll see for a long time. But when you try to make me believe that Howard was a mature visionary in the vein of William Blake or W.B. Yeats, rather than a talented, but emotionally crippled young man whose very shortcomings gave his daydreams their incredible vividness, well, I don't go along, and I don't think many other peo-

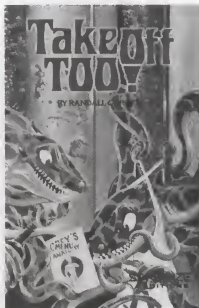
ple will either. The texts do not betray many profundities.

Rating: ☆☆☆

#### *How To Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy, and Science Fiction*

Edited by J.N. Williamson  
Writer's Digest Books, 1987  
242 pp., \$15.95

The title says all. This is the most widely ranging How-To book the field has yet seen. The articles are good and solid, by people as famous as Ray Bradbury, Dean Koontz, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Colin Wilson, and some not so famous.



Williamson pays more attention to the small-press field than any such book ever has before. There are extensive bibliographies, and even a somewhat eccentric reading list in the three fields covered. Worth browsing through in any case, and if you want to be a writer, to be studied thoroughly.

Rating: ☆☆☆

#### *J.T. McIntosh: Memoir and Bibliography*

Edited by Ian Covell  
Chris Drumm Booklet No. 25  
1987, 32 pp., \$5.00 (signed edition), \$2.00 (regular)

J.T. McIntosh was a British writer, active from the '50s into the late '70s, who sold to the best

magazines, published several books (the best known was *One in Three Hundred*), and then eventually gave up writing. Here's why. The result is interesting, rather sad reading as it details the birth, growth, and death of a writing career. McIntosh feels alienated from current SF. I think he's wrong, and could sell again if only he tried. But he's not trying. So this pamphlet is a final footnote for future reference.

Rating: ☆☆

#### *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*

Edited by Malcolm South  
Greenwood Press, 1987  
393 pp., \$49.95

Quite unlike the various illustrated non-books on Elves, Gnomes, etc., that you see on remainder tables, this one is a work of real scholarship. Various professors (who, happily, write better than professors usually do) give the rundown on the history of belief in and literary use of unicorns, dragons, elves, vampires, harpies, etc. It's a solid mix of folklore, mythology, and literary studies, at fifty bucks almost exclusively a library item, but worth looking at. Or, if you buy no other book on imaginary critters, maybe you should break down and get this one.

Rating: ☆☆☆

— ABO —

## Our Next Issue

Award-winning British SF author Ian Watson will be featured in our next issue — the completion of our first year of publication — with his novelette, "The Milk of Knowledge." And Frederik Pohl will make a return appearance with a pithy feature expressing some of his views on the Chernobyl and Challenger disasters. We'll also have a number of other stories and our usual features. It's an issue you won't want to miss.



**Above:** Once in a Blue Moon  
**Right:** Crystal Queen

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